

Halo 3: Ascension

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Summary: A take on what Halo 3 could have been. The Arbiter prepares to lead his forces to the Ark, but first he must make them accept the humans. His job becomes harder as the Covenant civil war rages on. Meanwhile, a Grunt inadvertently becomes a pivotal figure.

1. Prologue

Sangheili - Elite

> Unggoy - Grunt
 Lekgolo - Hunter

> Jiralhanae - Brute
 Kig-Yar - Jackal

> Yanme'e - Drone
 Huragok - Engineer

> Prophet - Prophet<p>

* * *

>"Rrrah!" Tartarus swung his hammer at him, missing by mere inches. The Arbiter ran backwards, shooting with both Jiralhanae-made plasma rifles. The red-colored plasma flowed harmlessly off the enhanced body shield. The rifles overheated, spilling out plasma. The Sangheili frantically held them away from his body, allowing the plasma to drop to the ground.<p><p>

Tartarus, seizing his chance, smashed his hammer into the Arbiter's chest. The hammer blew through his body shield and crushed the ancient armor. Tartarus laughed as the Sangheili cried out in pain. "So here ends the mighty Arbiter!" He raised his hammer for the killing blowâ€| and was hit in the back of the head by the Human's particle beam rifle!

The beam, instead of bouncing off the Jiralhanae's shield as the other weapons did, caused Tartarus to jerk in pain. A second shot made him lower his hammer. The third shot completely took out his shield! The Arbiter raised both rifles and shot plasma into the Jiralhanae. Tartarus roared as the plasma burned through his chest and with one last cry, he fell.

Without wasting any time, the Human Commander acted, jumping from platform to platform to finally land on the main level. She ran past him to the beam of energy, removing the Icon. The energy beam intensified, and then fired up through the ceiling. After a few seconds, the beam faded away and all was quiet. The Arbiter rose, ignoring the intense pain in his chest, to approach the Human Commander. He stopped, however, as the console shifted image, becoming a cloud of geometric shapes. The Human Commander studied it as the Oracle floated down to her, carrying the darker Human.

"What's that?" the Human Commander questioned the Oracle.

"A beacon," the Oracle answered simply. The dark Human dropped off onto the platform and joined his Commander.

"What's it doing?" she asked.

"Communicating," answered the Oracle, "At super-luminal speeds, with a frequency of-"

"Communicating with what?" the Human interrupted.

"The other installations," the Oracle replied, as though surprised that the Human did not know.

"Show me," the Human commanded.

The Oracle turned to the hologram, interfacing with it. From a storm of geometric shapes, emerged the seven Sacred Rings. He moved in closer, noting that a small red note was attached to one of the Halos, likely noting it was destroyed by the Demon. The Oracle then spoke, breaking the Sangheili out of his thoughts.

"Fail-safe protocol. In the event of unexpected shut-down, the entire system will move to standby status. All remaining platforms are now ready for remote activation."

"Remote activation?" repeated the Human. "From here?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the Oracle said in a patronizing tone. The darker Human (Jahnsen, was it?) moved in angrily.

"Listen, Tinkerbelle," Jahnsen started, "Don't make me-"

The Human Commander quickly cut him off with a question to the Oracle, "Then where? Where would someone go to activate the other Rings?"

The Oracle looked at them both, apparently baffled at the question. "Why the Ark of course," the Oracle finally answered.

"And where, Oracle, is that?" he asked, stepping into the group. The Humans stared up at him, perhaps astonished that he had left them alive.

"Scanning," the Oracle intoned as it turned back to the console. The hologram soon changed into a depiction of the galaxy. "Ark detected," announced the Oracle. The holographic galaxy rose, and a holographic star system took its place. "On the third planet of a planetary

system approximately 6,100 light-years from our position."

"My god," the Human Commander said in a quiet voice.
"That'sâ€¦"

"Earth," finished the other.

Earth? The Human planet attacked by the High Prophet of Regret?
"Oracle," the Arbiter began, "Can the Ark be disabled from here?"

"Certainly not," the Oracle stated, "My creators specifically created the Ark to control the installations. Should there ever be a circumstance where the countdown sequence is disrupted; the Reclaimers would override such infraction from the Ark."

"What are Reclaimers?" the Human Commander asked, making the Oracle turn to stare at her. After a long moment, the Oracle spoke.

"Whyâ€¦ the Reclaimersâ€¦" The Oracle indicated the Humans. "_You_ are the Reclaimers," the Oracle said, utterly bewildered.

"Say what!" cried Jahnsen.

The Oracle looked between the two of them, concerned. "Are you two perhapsâ€¦ ill?"

"We're fine," the Human Commander began to say, but stopped as a party of Sangheili reinforcements entered the chamber.

2. Nothing Lasts Forever

Five SpecOps Sangheili in shining white armor, led by a gold-armored Zealot Commander entered the chamber. The Commander unleashed his sword in preparation for battle, the blue plasma springing forth from the hilt. One by one, they leapt down to the platform and ran toward the Arbiter.

The Arbiter rubbed his chest where Tartarus's hammer had struck. He winced at the pain. It would be good to get back to the Huragok healers. As the team neared, he realized they would see the Humans as hostile, and moved to intercept them.

"Do not harm the Humans," the Arbiter commanded. The Commander raised a hand to stop his subordinates, and then stepped forward himself. The Arbiter realized that this was Gerka 'Setfethee, Ship Master of the _Eternally Faithful_. Through exceptional battlefield skills, this Sangheili had achieved significant prestige.

'Setfethee bowed his head respectfully and spoke with a bold, clear voice. "Yes, Arbiter, I have heard of your alliance with the Humans." Despite the Commander's carefully neutral tone, he could still hear a disgusted inflection on 'Humans'. "I see you have killed Tartarus. If you have no further business here, I suggest we make our way to our fortification." He disengaged his sword and strapped it to his hip.

The Arbiter began to agree, when he realized he had no true authority over the Humans; their alliance had been a thing of pure necessity.

Tartarus would have activated the Sacred Rings and ended all life—they had to ally. Now that Tartarus was dead and the countdown stopped, did that mean they were enemies once more? Not necessarily, for it was the Prophets who had declared war on the Humans; the Sangheili race should have no quarrel with them.

The Arbiter turned to the Human Commander. "Commander," he began, feeling the eyes of the other Sangheili on him. "I thank you for your assistance. Now I ask you to aid us once more, if you are willing. If we can prevail over the Brutes, I will personally ensure that no Elite will ever harm another Human in the name of the Prophets."

The Arbiter felt the eyes of his fellow Sangheili boring into him. He was not exceptionally skilled at interpreting Human expressions, but he could tell that the Human Commander was equally stunned by his words.

"I'm very glad that you have seen benefits of such collaboration. Thank you for making this choice," the Commander finally said, "I will take any steps towards a peace between our species."

"Heh. You got that right," Jahnsen said.

"Surely this is in jest," one of the SpecOps soldiers snarled in outrage. "For it would be no less than heresy to ally ourselves with the Humans."

"Silence, 'Opskitee!" The Zealot turned to admonish the Sangheili. "This is the Arbiter, the hand of the Prophets; if there is any we can depend on in these violent times, it is him. While I am—" the Commander paused, searching for a proper phrasing, "Surprised by the Arbiter's decision, I will follow his command until death."

The offender was wise enough to know when to stop fighting. He lowered his head in submission. "My apologies, Commander."

The Arbiter felt a burst of pride fill him that almost made him forget his injuries; despite his colossal violation of the Oath, he was being defended by a Ship Master. Of course, it is foolish to place value on such things, he chided himself. Was he not a warrior? The Oracle looked between them, apparently fascinated by the discussion.

"Now then," 'Setfethee said, slipping into a rough English for the Humans' comprehension. "We have wasted enough time here; I suggest we return to the Phantom before the Jiralhanae decide to attack."

Unable to argue with the Commander's logic, the Human Commander ordered the Oracle to return the platform to its original position. Before leaving, the Arbiter lifted Tartarus' battle hammer. He would keep it as a trophy of his victory. They made their way through the debris caused by Jahnsen's Scarab and emerged to the sight of the Scarab itself, stretched out on the control-room's front. Its back legs supported it on the ground while its front legs were placed up on the building. While it was an undignified position, he saw no other way for Jahnsen to have entered. Balanced on the Scarab's cannon, Commander 'Setfethee's Phantom waited for their return.

He noticed that the cruiser which once hovered nearby had departed. He hoped Commander 'Vadumee had managed to retake it as he had set out to do. The Sangheili paused on the ledge and took a moment to admire the Forerunners' profound work. He flexed his mandibles, breathing in the cool air, as he gazed at the brilliant landscape before him.

The last few days had been very tough for the Sangheili. After watching the Demon destroy the Sacred Ring, an object he revered beyond all others, he had been declared a heretic and sentenced to public disgrace. He had been tortured for hours before given the Mark of Shame, something that he would truly never be able to hide. When the High Prophet of Truth had offered him the position of Arbiter, how was he to refuse? Death on the battlefield was far preferable to death by execution, and all the better if he would do the work of the Prophets. Additionally, he would receive the honor of having his corpse preserved in the Mausoleum. If he could not go on the Great Journey, then at least he'd have a small piece of immortality.

As the Arbiter, he had killed those who perverted their faith and fought his way through numerous waves of the Parasite, released by the heretics as a weapon. Before he was free of that struggle, he had faced the heretic leader, revealed to be holding the Oracle. The heretic had used a defiled version of holodrones that could cause damage to the Arbiter, while his own attacks did nothing. The Arbiter had managed to corner the heretic and kill him using an Unggoy fuel rod cannon, then dropped the heretics' fortified Forerunner mine into the crushing depths of the gas-planet.

It had been less than a unit before it was announced that another Sacred Ring had been found, but that the High Prophet of Regret had been murdered by the Humans—specifically the Demon. Despite the rage that had filled him, he had remained focused on his task to retrieve the Sacred Icon. He had fought his way through legions of Flood and Enforcers, only to find the Icon locked in a sheath, hovering over a great shaft. If two Humans—the same Humans he now fought with—were not there to retrieve the Icon for him, he knew not what he would have done. After he had secured the Icon, it was taken by Tartarus, who, acting on the orders of the High Prophets, had cast him into the shaft.

His intense descent through the Library made him lapse into sleep. When he awoke, both he and the Demon were in the grasp of the Parasite leader: a massive, tentacled creature. The creature spoke of the Prophets leading them to their deaths; the same words spoken by the Humans and the heretics. He would have disregarded the Parasite's words had he not been betrayed by the Prophets only moments before. The creature then told them that there was time to stop the key from turning, but first they had to find it.

"_Fate had us meet as foes, but this ring will make us brothers!_" The Parasite had declared, before bending the very fabric of space and sending the Arbiter to a stretch of land not far from the Sacred Ring's control-room. As he made his way toward it, the Arbiter had learned that the Jiralhanae race, along with the Kig-Yar and Yanme'e, had begun murdering the Sangheili, Lekgolo and Unggoy of the Covenant, and made up his mind to stop the Hierarchs from finding the path. When Jahnsen commandeered the Scarab and demanded a truce, he had immediately agreed.

Together, they made their way into the control-room. There, they had all listened to the truth told by the Oracle. The Arbiter, despite his sorrow, was able to accept the Prophets' betrayal. Tartarus did not, and attempted to have them walk the path to destruction. With the help of the Humans, the Arbiter was able to slay him and stop the Great Journey weapon. Yes, it had been a very long, difficult day. But now, with the truth known and a new alliance, the Sangheili felt better than he had felt in a long time.

"Arbiter!" beckoned Ship Master 'Setfethee. The Arbiter came to his senses and led the Humans into the Phantom.

Three Sangheili veterans greeted them as they entered. They stared in awe at the Oracle, who hovered around the cabin, making comments on the design. After a moment had gone by, they turned their gazes from the Oracle and looked curiously at the Humans, particularly Jahnsen's particle beam rifle and his Commander holding the Sacred Icon. "Prisoners, Arbiter?" one questioned.

"Allies," the Arbiter said firmly. "I will explain it all when we reach our fortification."

The Sangheili looked as though they wanted to question further, but refrained out of respect. They did trade each other meaningful glances, however.

"Arbiter? Might I speak with you, Arbiter?"

The Arbiter turned to see 'Setfethee standing at the far end of the craft. Excusing himself from the red-armored warriors, he placed his trophy in a weapons compartment and joined the Ship Master.

"Arbiter," the Commander began in a low voice, "Your decision to ally our noble race with the likes of the Humans is not only a breach of the Oath we all swore, but a true insult to us and our ancestors. Earlier, I supported your words merely to punish the insolent 'Opskitee, but I see it as a blatant attack on everything the Covenant stands for. I was truthful when I spoke of following you until my death, however, I must warn you that others _will not share my viewpoint_â€|" he broke off to look to his left. The Arbiter followed his gaze. The two Humans spoke to each other quietly, while the Sangheili warriors glared at them with hate.

"It could end here," the Ship Master spoke up in a soft yet frantic voice. "The Humans are contained and outmatched. They are armed with merely a Kig-Yar's rifle in a crowded Phantom; they have no prospect of survival. Tartarus is dead, we have the Oracle and the Sacred Icon; there is no longer a need for an alliance. Arbiter, I bid you, _let it end here_!"

During 'Setfethee's speech, the Arbiter felt all his new sense of pride drain away. "No," he said simply. "The Humans are not our enemies. My decision can not be swayed." He shared a hard look with the Ship Master.

"Commander 'Setfethee, a word?" buzzed the internal radio. It was the pilot.

'Setfethee glanced toward the cockpit but continued addressing the

Arbiter. "Very well, Arbiter. But know the time will come that you will regret your choice." He turned and entered the cockpit.

The Arbiter sighed. _So much for my good feelingâ€|_

3. Lost Sanctuary

Sergeant Johnson gripped the rifle as he watched the Elites glare at them; he glared back. Stepping closer to Commander Keyes, he muttered, "So, we've joined the Elites to fight in their rebellionâ€| They don't seem very grateful." This he directed at the nearest Elite. The alien snarled, flexing its mandibles.

"With _In Amber Clad_ taken by the Flood, we need as many friends as we can get." Commander Keyes said, smiling at the surrounding Elites. All this seemed to do was anger them more. Her smile faded. "At least the one in the fancy armor seems committed to our truce," she said as she rested against the Phantom's dark blue wall.

Johnson eyed said Elite as he spoke with the gold-armored Elite on the far side of the cabin. "Yes, ma'am. He's called 'the Arbiter'. I heard the Brutes talk about him. He seems to be some kind of Elite criminal who the Prophets made into a very high-ranking leader."

They watched as the two Elites argued with each other in their alien language, the gold one leaving into what must have been the cockpit. The Arbiter approached what Johnson recognized as a holographic generator on the side of the wall, and ran his hand up and down the side. After a bit of fiddling with it, the Elite left it be.

"Ma'am, what do you propose we do about this 'Ark'?" Johnson asked.

"We'll just have to convince the Elites to take their battle to Earth," Commander Keyes said. "From there, the Monitor should be able to find its location. We will then only need to reach the Ark and disable the Halos."

"Huh," Johnson grunted. "Sounds simple." _Like things ever areâ€|_

The gold-armored Elite came back into the room and spoke with the Arbiter for a moment, then turned and barked an order. All the Elites, save for the Arbiter, stood at attention. As the Elite addressed his troops, the Arbiter approached the humans.

"We have sighted an Apparition troop-carrier following us from afar," the Arbiter told them, "To ensure that the Brutes do not find our encampment, we will lead it far from our path and then destroy it."

"Ship Master, I have sighted the perfect area for our trap," Kiga 'Oimomee spoke into the radio as he steered the Phantom toward what appeared to be the ruins of an ancient temple. The compound was set in a small valley, with small waterfalls flowing down the sides and into a pool in the center.

"Excellent," the Ship Master's voice came through the speaker.

"Proceed to engage the enemy craft."

Kiga reduced the Phantom's speed as he approached the site. He looked at his aft display and laughed as he saw the Jiralhanae dropship slow to match his speed. _Loathsome rabble!_ He flew the Phantom slowly over a small cliff on the side of the temple complex. Just as the Phantom had cleared the top, Kiga moved it down and out of sight of the Apparition. He hovered the craft, waiting. "Steel yourself," he told his co-pilot, 'Tsafonee, who grunted in reply.

Kiga gripped the controls in excitement; never had he done battle in a dropship before. He had been trained primarily as a Shadow driver but after the rebellion began, he had been assigned to ferry troops in Phantoms. Such was his delight when he found himself the pilot of Ship Master 'Setfethee and the Arbiter!

Finally, the Apparition cleared the hill and was directly above them. The Jiralhanae saw them and tried to disengage. Kiga, however, sped after them at once. "Fire!" His co-pilot acted promptly, spilling plasma fire over the dropship's aft. The enemy, instead of returning fire as Kiga expected, swung around and smashed their starboard troop bay into the Phantom's underbelly. The Phantom shook with the impact. Kiga pulled the craft back hard, feeling the controls vibrate under his hands.

"Status!" He cried.

"Our first and third cannons are offline," 'Tsafonee reported. "The fuel line for the gravity lift has been ruptured; it will be offline shortly."

The Apparition shook off its shattered bay and tilted sideways, revealing an open corridor. In the opening stood a Jiralhanae wielding a sword; the beast shook the weapon tauntingly. Kiga growled; the sword was a sacred weapon of the Sangheili. Thinking about an unworthy Jiralhanae using one filled him with disgust. Just as he gave the order to fire, the Apparition's cannon swiveled around and fired on them.

"We have lost the last cannon," 'Tsafonee reported grimly.

Silently cursing the Jiralhanae, Kiga quickly informed the Ship Master of the current situation. He moved the Phantom out of the Apparition's range, sliding towards a temple structure as it gave chase. To his surprise, the one who answered was not 'Setfethee, but in fact the Arbiter.

"I believe I have a solution," the Arbiter said. "Meet the gravity lift with the opening so that we may do battle with the enemy."

"Yes, Arbiter," Kiga said, following his orders hastily. He moved the craft into position, swinging treacherously close to a building on one side of the temple complex. _I hope this does not mean a demotion!_ _

As he collected his Jiralhanae-made rifles, the Arbiter quickly explained the situation to the Humans. "While we are in the troop carrier, you must guard the Oracle and the Sacred Icon. You may wish to further arm yourselves," he said, indicating the weapon storage

containers built into the walls.

The alien Commander opened an Unggoy's compartment and, after sifting through the supplies, removed a needler and two crystals. Jahnsen chose four grenades and raised his rifle to a firing position.

The Phantom groaned as it once more made contact with the Apparition. "We are in position, Arbiter," the pilot said.

"Very good, warrior," the Arbiter said into the radio. "Hold as long as possible." He turned to the warriors, "Attack!"

The Arbiter engaged his camouflage, raised his rifles and charged forward. He quickly stopped before reaching the lift, realizing that his camouflage was not on. Putting down a rifle, he ran his hand over the armor's sensors more deliberately but with no effect. He realized with a jolt that his body shield was not there either. _Tartarus's blow must have dealt more damage than I believedâ€|_

He was too important to take such risks. While traditionally an Arbiter would place himself in the greatest of danger, these were very unusual times. Because the Prophets had betrayed the Sangheili, he was needed to inspire courage among the troops. He was also the only Sangheili who knew the truth of the Sacred Rings, the only one who would be able to protect the Humans. _Will 'Setfethee continue to accept the Humans as allies if I should die? _He did not think so. Despite the Arbiter custom, it would be best for him to wait behind in the Phantom.

"Is there something wrong, Arbiter?" asked Commander 'Setfethee.

Startled out of his thoughts, he realized he had stood there for the past ten seconds. Turning to the Sangheili, he informed them of his circumstances. "I will have to stay here."

"Upon reaching our stronghold, we shall have the Huragok restore it to its full glory," 'Setfethee said. "For now, let us handle the battle." He turned to his Sangheili, "Come, my warriors, let us show these creatures our blades!" The Sangheili disappeared through the lift.

Kiga hissed as the enemy craft slid away from him. Fortunately, the Arbiter's troops had successfully entered the craft, as was evidenced by the dropship ceasing to fire on his Phantom. However, Kiga had a suspicion the Arbiter would be angry should he find the connection broken. _I am in enough trouble already,_ he thought as he chased the Apparition toward a small tower in the center of the complex. An idea formed in his head as he eyed the tower's open roof.

When the Apparition was directly over the opening, Kiga slammed the Phantom down into the enemy dropship, forcing it into the tower. Here the dropship would be effectively contained, unless the Jiralhanae chose to abandon their craft and flee. Kiga hoped they would; then they could be hunted down!

"We have lost the gravity lift," 'Tsafonee said anxiously.

"It matters little," Kiga said with more confidence than he truly had. "It would have lost power regardless. Now that the Apparition is

contained, the Arbiter may complete his task."

"â€|which is why I simply cannot understand why you meddlers insist on behaving in such primitiveâ€|" the Oracle was saying, when the Phantom violently shook, stopping him in midsentence. "Oh dearâ€|"

The sudden sounds of battle filling the air made the Arbiter realize that the Phantom's gravity lift had finally succumbed to the dropship's abuse. "Oracle, do not expose yourself!" He ordered quickly. While it was doubtful these Jiralhanae had any gravity tools strong enough to capture the Oracle, he was not going to take any chances.

Careful, he crept over to the opening and looked through. They appeared to be in a circular chamber of Forerunner build. Below them, the one-winged Apparition lay pinned to the ground, the sounds of frenzied battle still coming from its interior. As he watched, a Jiralhanae emerged from the opening and began to flee from the battle, splashing through a thin layer of water covering the ground.

Suddenly, a particle beam shot out from the Arbiter's right, hitting the beast directly in the head. As the body fell, the Arbiter turned in surprise to see Jahnsen standing at his side. This Human seemed to have a talent for moving unseen and unheard.

"You wield that weapon very well," the Arbiter complemented him, remembering that it was his shots that extinguished Tartarus' enhanced body shield.

"The United Nations Naval Academy trains all officers in the use of known Covenant weaponry," Jahnsen explained, sounding pleased.

"When I was a Supreme Commander," the Arbiter said, "I attempted to have a law implemented to have all warriors instructed in the use of Human weaponry and vehicles. I am afraid my request was ignored by the Council." _Because I was the heretic who lost the Sacred Ringâ€|_

"Well, now that the Covenant has split," Jahnsen said carefully, studying his expression, "I'm sure you'll be able to command these _Elites_ all you want."

"Yes, as Arbiter, all _Elites_ are under my command," the Arbiter asserted. Inwardly he worried the statement would prove to be inaccurate. Seeming satisfied with his response, Jahnsen nodded his head. The Arbiter absently rubbed the Mark of Shame, noticing the sounds of battle had ended.

4. Resolve

'Setfethee swung his blade into the last Jiralhanae, slicing him in two. He paused to take a breath as his shield recharged. These Jiralhanae had been stronger than any he had yet faced. They had not only worn the armor of Honor Guards, but wore body shields and two had wielded Sangheili swords. He examined the markings on their armor. Yes, these were the guardians of the Prophet of Justice. _Interestingâ€|_

"Ship Master!"

'Setfethee quickly regained his senses. 'Opskitee limped toward him from the control room, dark Jiralhanae blood dripping down his body shield. "'Opskitee, what is our status?" he asked.

"Excellency, 'Gamstikee, 'Hoktapee, 'Akpomee, and 'Segbleimee have all fallen to the Jiralhanae," 'Opskitee reported, solemn. "As have two of the veterans. One lies unmoving but living."

Forerunners have mercy! He cried silently. _Must all my Sangheili perish before our lords have their fill?_

"Excellency, the Phantom is greatly damaged," 'Opskitee continued. "We have lost both the cannons and the gravity lift. With the Arbiter in his present condition, it is crucial we reach the base as swift as possible."

"Yes, we must not tempt fate," he agreed. "Take the wounded into the Phantom, I shall follow shortly."

'Opskitee began to leave, but stopped. "Excellency, I understand the Arbiter is the Prophets' hand, and his word is to be trustedâ€¦ However, I wonder if our choice to ally with the Humans may have upset the Forerunners enough that they sought vengeance on us?"

"Enough!" 'Setfethee snapped. "I do not wish to hear any more of this! 'Opskitee, to your task!"

"Yes, Excellency," he answered shortly, moving at once.

After he had left, 'Setfethee sighed. Although he had sworn his life to the Prophets and the Arbiter, he definitely saw truth in 'Opskitee's words. The Prophets say to kill Humans; to disobey the Prophets is heresy. The Forerunners punished heretics. That was the way of it. _Yet,_ he thought, _the Arbiter _is_ the will of the Prophets._ The Arbiter now said to ally ourselves with the Humans. _Therefore, it is no longer the Prophets' will to kill Humans,_ he decided finally. The deaths of six Sangheili were no more than tragic circumstances.

Walking over to the consoles, he activated the communications log. A list of all transmissions scrolled over the display. _Excellent._ He downloaded the information into his armor and exited the craft. Finding himself hoof-deep in water, he looked around, finding they were in some ancient temple site crafted by the Forerunner. He felt a pang of sorrow, realizing they had defiled this holy place. He sighed, promising to alert the Prophets of its existence. Utilizing a ramp, he made his way up to the level of the hovering Phantom. Leaping onto the stub of a smashed cannon, he climbed over to the lift opening.

Eito 'Opskitee stood at attention in his perimeter even as the Ship Master piloted the Phantom. After carrying the wounded veteran inside, the Arbiter had helped him lay him flat on the cockpit floor. They had decided it was too probable the Sangheili would fall through the broken lift should he be left in the main chamber. Ship Master 'Setfethee had harshly berated the pilot for making poorly thought

out tactical decisions, insisting that he assume the task for the remainder of the travel. The blue-armored fool now stood with the Arbiter and the Humans.

Eito clicked his mandibles in disgust. The pilot actually seemed intrigued by the notion of an allegiance, asking them questions in their English. Eito simply could not understand why these people would ever think that Humans, the abominations of the galaxy, could ever be considered to be at the same level as the Sangheili or even the Unggoy.

He had been raised to look upon the Arbiter as a hero, the blade of the Prophets, taking on important tasks to enforce their might. However it was obvious this Arbiter had made a terrible mistake. There, it has been thought. To say the Arbiter made mistakes was to say the Prophets made mistakes, the greatest blasphemy. If he was heard uttering it, he would be stripped of his honor and cast into the abyss of space. Yet, would I not suffer a worse fate for declaring a Human equal to a Sangheili?

He bowed his head as he thought on this dilemma. All at once it came to him: The Prophets had made a mistake in trusting the Jiralhanae; the vile beasts were attempting to take over the Covenant and walk the path alone. As hard as it was to comprehend, the Prophets were not flawless when it came to recognizing the evils inherent in other races. Neither, it seemed, was the Arbiter.

He looked back over at the Humans. They had already corrupted the Arbiter and the Ship Master, now they were working on this pilot. He had a vision of Humans ruling the Covenant, forcing their great race into servitude as they alone walked the path. No. He swore to himself, the Prophets, and the Forerunner, that he would do everything in his power to stop it from taking place.

"Arbiter, we have reached our fortification," the Ship Master's voice came suddenly, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Excellent, Commander," the Arbiter said.

Eito took a breath. Yes, soon the Arbiter would go to the healers and the Humans would be unprotected. He would have to act swiftly and quietly, something a warrior of his class was well prepared for. He felt the Phantom descending and stole another glance at their weapons. A needler and a Kig-Yar's rifle, both useless at close range. Perfect, he thought as they landed.

Jitji stood at the console, watching the image of the heavily damaged Phantom enter the makeshift launch bay. He blinked back his tiredness and was preparing to send a request for Huragok, when a voice behind him snapped suddenly, "Unggoy!"

Startled, Jitji yelped as he turned. A red-armored Sangheili glared at him. This was 'Neporee, he realized, the Commander of the guards. He quickly attempted to regain his composure. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Unggoy, have you prepared any excuse for not alerting us of an approaching Phantom?" The Sangheili's mandibles spread in anger, and Jitji hastened to reply.

"Excellency, they broadcast sign of Councilor," the Unggoy said meekly, pointing out the signal displayed on the console.

"Worthless!" Spat 'Neporee. "Could not a Jiralhanae manufacture such a signal? Could they not have stolen the code while they _murdered_ half of our Council! Brainless fool!"

Terrified, Jitji lowered his head and stammered an apology. Continuing to glare at him, the Sangheili said, "I will allow you to live, Unggoy, but you will no longer monitor the entrance; you will now serve with the guarding troops. Now go."

"Thank you, Excellency," Jitji said, leaving quickly.

"Commander, if you wish it," the Arbiter said. "I can carry you out of the Phantom."

They had landed at the bottom of some ancient shaft, which apparently connected to a Forerunner facility repurposed for use by the Sangheili. Although 'Setfethee assured him the entryway was within sight of the Phantom, the Arbiter could see nothing but darkness as he stared down the opening.

"Don't worry," the Human said, "I'll be fine." She stepped over to the hole.

Worried she would be unable to climb safely, the Arbiter offered to hold her weapon. Again she declined, and slipping the needler into her belt, climbed down. Jahnsen was quick to follow. The Arbiter made sure the Oracle would follow him, and then leapt down into the darkness.

Immediately, he could see the outline of a door. Two light markers cast their glow upon it. Wondering how anyone could have ever found such a place, he looked around for the others. After a moment, his eyes found their forms in the shadows. 'Opskitee and 'Oimomee had carried the unconscious Sangheili out of the Phantom. The co-pilot, perhaps not wishing to be near the Humans, had left as soon as 'Setfethee had. The Oracle seemed very distraught at the sight of the aged shaft, now covered in dust and growth.

"How unseemly!" The Oracle exclaimed as it examined the ancient structure. "To think that the Monitor of this Installation would let the constructions reach this horrid condition!"

Another Oracle? A piece of memory flashed through his mind. _"Greetings. I am 2401 Penitent Tangent. I am the Monitor of Installation 05."_

"Holy Oracle," the Arbiter said, "I have seen this Sacred Ring's Oracle held in the grasp of the Parasite leader."

"A Monitor allowed itself to be captured by a Flood intelligence form? How impossibly thoughtless!" The Oracle fumed. "I suppose I will have to assume the position myself."

The Oracle floated to a section of the decayed wall and fired a fine beam of green energy. The energy burned through the grime, and seemed to flow into the architecture itself.

Could the Oracle be somehow repairing the structure? he wondered in awe. An instant later, the door opened, and a group of Unggoy led by a Sangheili minor rushed out.

"See?" cried an Unggoy. "Enemies!" The soldier fired a stream of needles at the Humans.

"The Humans are not to be harmed!" He roared at the group. He watched in fear and anticipation as the pink spines neared his allies. He felt relief when they, leaping aside, managed to dodge them. _Of course,_ he thought. _They must have been trained to avoid such things._

"Hold your fire!" The Sangheili called. "Arbiter! We were not aware it was you! We thought the Jiralhanae had stolen your craft."

"Just allow us entry," he growled, "And tell everyone we have two Humans with us that are not to be harmed in any way."

"Yes, Arbiter," the minor said, quickly leading his Unggoy back inside. Not five heartbeats later, a red-armored veteran came through the doorway.

"The greatest of apologies, Arbiter," the veteran said, keeping strict eye-contact with him. "When I reviewed your signal, I found no trace of the established entry code and assumed your craft to be hostile. Please, bear me no hatred."

"Your name?" asked the Arbiter.

"Anre 'Neporee," he said.

"'Neporee, of course I understand you defending your base," he said. "However, I find it worrying you did not share this code with your dropshipsâ€|"

"That was my error," 'Oimomee interrupted, bowing his head in shame. "I was told the entry code by my Commander, Kerp 'Lanukee. Yet when the Ship Master relieved me of my duties, I failed to inform him of its existence."

"Foolâ€|" 'Opskitee muttered under his breath. The Arbiter had to agree with his assessment. Through the battle with the Jiralhanae dropship, they had lost all three cannons and the gravity lift. He had to wonder how much of the damage had been caused by Jiralhanae and not the pilot's inexperience.

Yetâ€| This had been the first Sangheili to show an interest in an alliance with the Humans. Such a warrior could be useful to him. Perhaps he could guard the Humans from trigger-happy Unggoyâ€| or Sangheiliâ€| in the future. Deciding to keep an eye on 'Oimomee, he turned his attention back to the veteran.

"Now that we have that cleared up, allow us entry," the Arbiter said. "I must speak with the leaders in this fortification at once."

"Yes, Arbiter," 'Neporee answered. He stood aside so they could enter, allowing his eyes to stray over the Humans. His weight shifted with bemusement as he gazed upon their weapons.

"These Humans are not to be harmed," the Arbiter told him firmly, as he led the group inside. "Whoever attempts will face my wrath."

After being demoted to the lowest of ranks, Jitji had joined a group of Unggoy preparing to defend the base from the 'Jiralhanae attackers'. Just as they prepared for a deadly battle, the Sangheili came to inform them there would be no need for their assistance. The occupants of the Phantom had turned out to be none other than the Arbiter and fellow Sangheili. Angered that he had been demoted heedless of the circumstances, Jitji complained to his new leader, a red-armored Unggoy named Tatat.

"There nothing me can do," Tatat said with sympathy. "You know Sangheili have all power. You good soldier, you maybe get rank."

"Hope me live long enough," he said. Tatat nodded.

"Well, if we time, why not take drink at nipple?" Jitji suggested.

Tatat shook his head. "Sangheili have us on ration. When we ran from ships, we not take much food-drink. Now we only drink one time day."

"One!" Jitji asked in shock. An Unggoy would not live very long on such a diet. "Surely they find/bring food-drink next attack?"

"Me not know," Tatat said gloomily. "Me think they not care we starve."

Despair filled him. To think they were on a Sacred Ring, a symbol of salvation, only to face death from the mere disregard of their superiors. _Noâ€|_ Despair steeled into resolve as he found himself saying, "Me not let us starve. Me go on next attack, me make them bring food-drink."

* * *

>Author's Note: A lot of people have reviewed, informing me that Johnson's name is not spelled "Jahnsen". I know this, however, the Sangheili do not. When a part of the story is from a Covie's perspective, names are spelled the way they think of it. This is seen in Halo: The Flood, when Captain Keyes is refered to as Keezz.

5. Flood Warning

Commander Keyes followed the Elite, the 'Arbiter', into the facility with Sergeant Major Johnson at her side. Ignoring the various Elites and Grunts that stared at them, she questioned the Arbiter, "So what happens now?"

The Elite's head swung around on its elongated neck to look down at her. "I will inform the leaders in this base of our alliance and the truths learned from the Oracle," he said in a gruff yet powerful voice. "After, we shall retake a ship from the Brutes so we may reach

this 'Ark' and remove the threat of the Sacred Rings."

"Retake?" she asked. "You have no ships under Elite control?"

The Arbiter paused to speak to the gold armored Elite. "_We_ do not," he said finally. "We have been seperated from our greater forces and are unable to communicate. However, we are currently fighting for control of the land surrounding the _Zealous Missionary_ and the _Eternally Faithful_. Both sit upon the surface of Halo."

"Which one is more accessible?" she asked.

Once more, the Elites exchanged words. "The _Zealous Missionary_ rests on a small island perhaps 50,000 units from here. Most of the Brutes have left to fight on the mainland, leaving it exposed. However, any of our transports would be seen at once, making surprise attacks impossible."

"Units?" she questioned.

"Units of distance," he explained, stretching out his arms to demonstrate.

"About a meter," she noted. "What about this _Eternally Faithful_?"

"198,000 units away," he said. "In a cold mountain pass perhaps 16,000 units from the chamber which once housed the Sacred Icon. According to our reports, their ground forces have been occupied with repelling waves of the parasite. Commander Setfethy," he indicated the gold wearing Elite beside him, "Is the master of the vessel."

"Yes," agreed Commander Setfethy in rough English. "I ran from my ship, leaving the Brutes to the Flood."

The Flood? "It would be best to keep away from the Flood as much as possible," she decided. "The _Missionary_ sounds like our better option."

The Elites clicked their mandibles in what she took to be agreement, although Setfethy seemed somewhat reluctant. She could understand that; to a Commander, their ship was their home of a sort. Ignoring the sudden pangs from abandoning the _In Amber Clad_, she followed the Elites. They were led inside a nearby room containing several large chairs obviously built for Elites. Strange rectangular markings covered the floor and at least half of them had scorch marks. A rather foul odor was evident as they sat down on the presented chairs, presumably waiting for the door on the opposite end to open. While she awkwardly sat down without a thought, Sergeant Johnson stayed where he stood.

"I'd know that stink anywhere," he said. "This room's been crawling with Flood!"

She stiffened, her hand reaching toward her needler. He was right; it was the smell of Flood. Standing, she drew the weapon, ready for any attack.

The Flood? the Arbiter thought. _Yes, I should have identified the

smell sooner._ He drew the Jiralhanae-made rifles he had attached to his back and stood up. The Humans similarly raised their weapons and stood with their backs toward the Sangheili. Despite everything, he had to marvel at their trust.

"Peace, Arbiter!" 'Setfethee said hastily. "This room is secure; none of the Parasite are present."

"How do you know this?" he asked skeptically, lowering his rifles slightly.

"The Forerunner created this complex to house the Parasite, Arbiter," the Commander explained. "When we found it, many of these rooms contained tanks, imprisoning the Parasite in its lowest form. We were certain our gods left us these as gifts, as weapons to be used. However, we were in great need of space, so we moved the containers into the central shaft to be retrieved at a later time. When we attempted to move the container in this room it broke, spilling its contents to the ground. Ever prepared, we had rifles to purge the Parasite from the room." He gestured at the large scorch marks on the floor. "Arbiter, there are no Flood rampant in the complex. Now, do tell your Humans to lower their weapons!" He finished, looking pointedly at them.

Still digesting the information, he lowered his rifles and translated quickly.

"Have this shaft sealed off," the Human Commander advised him. "No one goes in or out."

He clicked his mandibles in agreement. "It shall be done."

Before anything more could be said, the door opened and thus entered Sangheili High Councilor Kagu 'Lafatee. The Arbiter remembered freeing him from the Jiralhanae prison soon before joining Jahnsen. "My most sincere apologies, Arbiter," he began, but stopped as he saw them with their weapons drawn. "Are you having trouble controlling your prisoners?" he asked in what the Arbiter took to be a rather condescending manner.

"Not at all," he replied calmly. "We merely reacted to the scent of the Parasite. Commander 'Setfethee soon told us of the earlier events. However, I should clarify, these Humans are not prisoners; they are allies."

The High Councilor clicked his mandibles in amusement. "Arbiter, you certainly realize neither of these Humans command a Scarab. We can slay them without delay."

"There is no reason for such an action," he said. "It is my will that these Humans be our allies."

"Is it?" 'Lafatee asked, mandibles pulled back in a questioning look. "Tell me, Arbiter, what use will two Humans have in a war against Jiralhanae?"

The Arbiter gestured to Jahnsen. "This one, Jahnsen, was instrumental in my defeat of Tartarusâ€¦"

"You know what I hate?" Jahnsen drawled suddenly, cutting him off.

"When people talk about you as if you're not there. Whatever you've got to say about us you say it to our faces, all right!"

"Jahnsenâ€|" the Human Commander hissed in warning. 'Opskitee growled softly.

"My apologies, Jahnsen," the Arbiter said after a second's thought. "The High Councilor was questioning your value as allies, and I was explaining your assistance in the defeat of Tartarus."

"That so?" Jahnsen said. "Make sure to include the part where you're about to have your skull crushed, and I save the day."

"The Human speaks the truth," he told 'Lafatee, in English for the Humans' benefit. "Tartarus had me at his mercy, and then Jahnsen brought down his body shield through expert wielding of a Kig-Yar's rifle, allowing me to send plasma throughout the beast's body.

'Lafatee bowed his head slightly, impressed. "And of the female?" he asked, also in English.

"I am Commander Muraandah Keezz of the United Nations Space Command," she introduced herself. "As well as being an adept Naval Officer, I command the frigate _In Amber Clad_. As for my achievements here, I removed the Index from its sheath; and the Monitor, what you call the Oracle, appears to follow my command."

"It appears I was mistaken," the High Councilor admitted. "Your Humans seem quite in touch with the Forerunners' will. I shall support this alliance, Arbiterâ€|" at least until the Prophets hear of it."

"Good," he said. "Because we have more important issues to discuss. I suggest you send for the Oracle."

Jitji stood in line for one of the rooms converted into a methane pit. If Tatat was correct, this was where the Special Operations Unggoy rested. Although he was assigned to a room on the other side of the complex, he was hoping the bored-looking Sangheili minor by the entrance would be too indifferent to care. He felt himself tire, and blinked several times to ensure he would not fall asleep where he stood. At last, his turn came.

"Name?" asked the Sangheili.

"Jitji," he answered, trying to keep calm.

The Sangheili studied a holographic display mounted on the wall next to him. "You are not assigned here, Unggoy," he said gruffly.

"Yes, Excellency?" he asked, trying to sound surprised. "Me no recall me placementâ€|" Excellency, me very low tank. Why not you let me breathe now? Me find own pit after."

The Sangheili growled softly. "Unggoy are always being foolish. We have been betrayed by the Jiralhanae, Yanme'e, and Kig-Yar, forced

into hiding" and "you forget your methane pit!" He snarled in disgust.

"Forgive me, Excellency," Jitji said, bowing his head. "It not happen twice."

The Sangheili opened the door. "Enter, Unggoy," he hissed.

"Great thanks, Excellency," Jitji said as he entered the airlock. "First part done," he thought to himself in relief. He tapped a control recently attached to the wall, and the poisonous oxygen was sucked from the room through a vent. Another tap and it was soon filled with sweet methane. He removed his tank and mask, setting them on a provided rack, and entered the main chamber.

To his surprise, there was a masked Sangheili in the room guarding the food-nipple in the center. "An unforeseen complication," Jitji thought to himself wearily. "Too late to stop now," he decided, walking towards the Unggoy dressed in Special Operations armor farthest from the guard. "Greetings, friend," he said brightly.

"Greetings," the Unggoy responded, somewhat surprised.

"Me name Jitji," he continued on. "Guarding unit."

"Me Lamal," the Unggoy introduced himself. "Special Operations unit."

Jitji glanced at the Sangheili to make certain he was not listening and quietly asked, "Hungry?"

"Me can live on no food for days," Lamal replied stiffly.

Jitji marveled at his stamina, realizing this Unggoy really was one of the best. "You think we can?" he asked.

Lamal looked at him, glanced at the guard, and back to him. "You point?"

Jitji made sure the guard was not paying any attention before answering in a low voice, "There not enough food-drink to feed all Unggoy."

"What you think me do about it?" Lamal said quietly.

"Next attack, they send your unit?" Lamal grunted an affirmative. "When inside enemy base, an Unggoy should find food-drink/make unit bring back."

Lamal scowled. "You know what you ask me do? Me lose all rank, maybe life, if me win!"

"Then me do it," he said. "Give me armor, me be you. Sangheili never know difference." It seemed perfect. The Sangheili never paid enough attention to Unggoy to be able to tell them apart without their armor colorations.

"Maybe Sangheili fooled," Lamal admitted. "But not Unggoy in unit."

"Me convince Unggoy to help," he said confidently. "You not agree?"

Lamal scratched his cheek in thoughtful contemplation. "How we switch?"

"We do it in airlock," Jitji said, having the basic idea planned. "While it filled with methane, we switch armor."

"We not go together," Lamal said after a moment. "You leave room, soon me follow."

He agreed, and after saying his farewells, left for the airlock. Unfortunately, an Unggoy was currently inside and he had to wait for the methane to fill the chamber before he could enter. Upon entering, he greeted the Unggoy and pretended to examine his air tank while waiting for the other to leave the airlock. After a few seconds, the Unggoy walked into the main chamber. Jitji watched with relief as the doors began to close behind him, then his heart skipped a beat. Lamal was talking to the Sangheili guard.

Has he betrayed me? thought Jitji with horror. His senses came back to him and he knew he must act. He quickly put on his air tank and mask, and then activated the airlock. The Sangheili would have to wait until the airlock filled with methane before he could enter. Jitji grabbed a pistol left on a shelf and held the trigger down, letting the weapon fill with plasma. He aimed it at the control panel and released. The hologram sparked and faded as the console melted. Now, it would be a good time before the guard would be able to leave the pit. _Still, the guard could have some way to communicate to the other Sangheili._ He decided to start moving.

6. It Won't be Long Now

"Noâ€|" the High Councilor murmured. "I cannot accept it. Arbiter, surely you must recognize the lunacy of such a suggestion!"

"Believe me, High Council member," the Arbiter said, "No one weeps more than I at this prospect. But the evidence is solid and we must act. Oracle, tell us again."

"The seven Fortress Worlds were designed by the Forerunners as potential offensive measures against the Flood," recited the Oracle. "When the parasite threatened to consume all my creators treasured, they activated the rings, killing all life forms in the galaxy with sufficient biomass to sustain the Flood."

"High Councilor," he said. "The Prophets tried to slay us all, and they may still succeed if we do not reach the Ark first."

"Arbiter," 'Setfethee said. "Even if this is true, are we certain the Prophets knew of it?"

He lowered his mandibles in a frown. "The Prophets have always restricted access to holyâ€|" to Forerunner articles for what purpose? There is something they did not wish us to know."

"Come now, Arbiter!" 'Lafatee said scornfully. "Which is the greater

possibility, the Prophets are traitors or the Oracle is false?"

"The Prophets have always said their word was truth," he said. "The High Prophets have also spoken of the Oracles' unfaltering wisdom. To say this Oracle is false is to say the Prophets are false."

Commander 'Setfethee lowered his head in despair. "Therefore the Prophets are false," he murmured quietly.

The High Councilor sucked in a breath. "You realize if the Prophets ever become aware of this conversation, we will all be sentenced to death?"

The Arbiter looked at him in disbelief. "We have learned the Prophets intend to kill us all, Councilor 'Lafatee. Now is the time to strike first! We already are at war with the Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar and Yanme'e; now we will attack those who lead them." 'Opskitee suddenly stamped his hooves upon the ground, growling with rage.

"Do you disagree with the Arbiter's words?" 'Setfethee asked him harshly. After a long moment, 'Opskitee closed his mandibles and bowed his head.

"I do not," he said softly.

"He is right to object," the High Councilor defended him. "Since the Covenant began we have followed the Prophets, protecting them as they searched for the Sacred Rings. To proclaim war on the Prophets is simplyâ€¦" he broke off.

"We warred with them once before, High Councilor. Remember your teachings. 'On and on shall old war go. Without respite my blood will flow,'" he quoted the Writ of Union. All at once, he saw the horrible truth before him. He hastened to explain to the others. "We ceased fighting when the Prophets shared with us the knowledge of the Forerunners, and formed the Covenant. The Prophets did so because they knew the war would never come in their favor; yet it was not in peace as we were taught. They knew the Sacred Rings were weapons and they intended to use the Sacred Rings to annihilate the Sangheili raceâ€¦ as we helped them!"

Jitji walked rapidly through the halls. He had decided to resume his original plan and stowaway on the next outgoing dropship. Fortunately, there seemed to be no knowledge of his actions as of yet. Something Jitji thanked and praised the Forerunners for, as he made his way toward the secondary entry shaft.

Turning a corner, he almost slammed into an Unggoy. Yelping, his fellow jumped back. He muttered a quick "Sorry," before continuing on. He blinked sleepily, acquiring the will to continue with an unspoken prayer to the Forerunners. Suddenly, his radio came to life.

"Attention: The Arbiter has brought two Humans into the complex. They are not to be harmed under any circumstances. Should any attempt be made, the violator shall suffer the harshest of punishments."

He gave a sigh of relief that he was not part of the announcement. Although, the wording seemed unusual. Why would the Arbiter deny the Humans to the skilled interrogaters? _Maybe he wants them for himself,_ he thought. But for what purpose? Surely he would not have time to torture them. Maybe he wants to keep them as servants? _No,_ he thought. Such a thing was surely prohibited by the Prophets. He stretched his arms. _There is no sense in trying to understand Sangheili._ The radio spoke again, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Attention: All Unggoy assigned to methane pit-3, report to the guard stations at once."

Well, now they know about me. Although, they hadn't yet realized it was him. _And as long as that guard doesn't remember my name, I'm free._ He continued toward the entry shaft.

Heretics! Fools! War with the Prophets? They had truly succumbed to madness! Worse still, the Arbiter was protecting the Humans. He would not be able to slay them with the two veterans guarding his prey. His casual attempt to persuade the guards proved useless and, no matter how horrible the Humans were, he would sooner kill himself than harm a fellow Sangheili. He would have to wait for the chance to strike to unveil itself.

The Arbiter had left the Humans in the High Councilor's quarters so they could 'assist in planning a strategic assault', while he visited the facility's healers. Eito, who had taken damage in the battle, chose to join him. Not together, of course; it would be improper to do such a thing. Instead, he had taken a longer route.

He listened as the intercom announced several orders pertaining to Unggoy as he walked, thinking how odd it was. _Could the Arbiter be preparing them for an attack?_ If that was so, why did they not simply state it in the announcements? It made little sense. He decided to speak to a Sangheili veteran passing through the hall.

"Greetings, warrior," he said, holding up a hand in greetings.

The veteran stopped at once. "Greetings, Excellency," he raised his own hand.

"I am Eito 'Opskitee, servant of Ship Master Gerka 'Setfethee," he introduced himself, lowering his hand. This was excellent â€" the veteran would surely answer any of his questions in an attempt to further his own career.

"I am Tsuku 'Lermugee."

Now that the introductions were complete, he continued. "Perhaps you would know why there have been numerous calls for Unggoy?"

'Lermugee shifted his mandibles to indicate affirmation. "Yes, Excellency. An Unggoy has damaged the airlock controls of a methane pit, sealing inside a Sangheili guard."

Eito's mind raced. _An Unggoy traitor? _This had to be the work of

the Humans! "Was the Sangheili harmed?" he asked.

'Lermugee tightened his mandibles in a denial. "The guards became aware of it rapidly and cut an opening, saving the Sangheili at the expense of the Unggoy held within."

"Unggoy can be replaced easily," he said dismissively. But perhaps if he were to examine the affected Unggoy, he would be able to prove the Humans' malignance. "Are you aware which Unggoy is the traitor?"

"I am not, Excellency," 'Lermugee admitted. "Perhaps Commander 'Neporee knows this answer."

He dismissed the veteran; he was of no more use to him. _Yes, I will make contact with the guards._ He headed for the nearest guard station.

Jitji paused. He had reached the guard station placed beside the secondary entry shaft. Dozens of Sangheili were present, but there were no other Unggoy in sight. _How unusualâ€|_

"Unggoy!"

A Sangheili minor was behind him. He nervously turned and bowed his head. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Unggoy, state your pit assignment," the Sangheili barked.

"Pit-1, Excellency," he said truthfully.

"Your name?"

He paused, and then answered, "Kopok, Excellency." It was the name of an equal he had served with as a security monitor, who he knew rested there.

The Sangheili paused to examine a handheld pad. "On your way, Unggoy," he said after what had appeared to be a very long moment.

He bowed respectfully, "Me thank you, Excellency."

The Sangheili nodded, and left Jitji to continue on his way. _That was close,_ he thought in relief. He continued toward the station's armory. If the design was identical to the primary station, the armory would lead into the shaft.

Sure enough, as he entered the room filled with weaponry, he saw a door on the far sideâ€| guarded by an Unggoy. This Unggoy wore the red armor of a leader, complete with a helmet ridge to signify his rank. The Unggoy turned to see him staring. "Who you?" the Unggoy asked.

Searching for a believable story, he decided to tell a partial truth. "Eh, me Kopok. Me be demoted to guard." In an attempt to seem authentic, he discretely shelved his pistol and began loading a needler.

The Unggoy narrowed his eyes in a frown. "Why you demoted?"

"Me fail to alert 'Neporee of Arbiter's arrival," he said truthfully.

"Me hear 'Neporee think Arbiter Jiralhanae," the Unggoy said, looking at him disapprovingly.

"Why me demoted," he explained, indicating his orange armor and small air tank. Now that the matter of who he was appeared to be without scrutiny, he addressed the door. "Why you guard door?"

"Leaders say 'no let Unggoy pass'," the Unggoy explained. "Me not know why."

Jitji tried to think of a way to have the Unggoy let him through. However, his 'mission' had been very hard on him. Filled with fear and desperation, he was unable to think of a peaceable approach. He raised the needler and aimed it at the leader, saying vehemently, "You leave door!"

The Unggoy's eyes widened in shock. Then, he quickly raised a radio to his mouth and said, "Crazy Unggoy here! Name Kopok!"

"No!" Jitji pulled the trigger and watched in horror as the stream of needles raced toward him. The Unggoy dropped his radio and ran from the stream. The stream followed him and struck his air tank. He fell to the ground as the needles burst, ripping a hole in his methane tank. He let loose a moan as he began to suffocate.

Horrorified at what he had done, Jitji hastily grabbed some extra ammunition and entered the shaft. Inside were five Phantoms and three Seraphs. He walked over to the farthest dropship, deciding it was least likely to be occupied and boarded it. It quickly became apparent that there were no others on board, and Jitji tried to relax while still horrified he had killed a fellow Unggoy. He considered trying to pilot the dropship himself but decided that would be suicidal and reverted to his plan to stowaway. He opened a secondary storage compartment for Unggoy and, shoving everything to the side, slipped inside. _With the backup methane tanks at close reach, I should have enough air to complete the mission,_ he thought to himself as he prepared for a long wait.

Hita 'Befuwee carefully watched as the Unggoy made its way over to the armory. There was no reason for an Unggoy to arm itself at this moment, making such actions suspicious. Especially because the Unggoy had identified itself as Kopok, and his data told him the Unggoy named Kopok served at the primary station. Protocol was to report this to his Commander. However, if this _was_ the traitor, 'Befuwee wished to have the honor of killing it himself.

He entered the armory to find a red-armored Unggoy dying on the floor, a hole burnt in its tank. Excitement came. It _was_ the traitor.

"Excellencyâ€¦|" the dying Unggoy moaned softly.

"Worry not, Unggoy," he told it. "The traitor will be found." He

grabbed a pistol from the shelves and ended the Unggoy's pain. Placing the pistol back on the shelves, he picked up a rifle and hunted for the traitor.

It was easy to see no vehicles had been taken, which meant the traitor was still within the shaft. He began searching through the vehicles to see if it was hiding in them. Not long after he started, numerous other Sangheili appeared to join his search. 'Befuwee felt disappointment; he had been hoping to find the traitor himself.

At last, only one vehicle remained unsearched. 'Befuwee followed two others into the Phantom. Feeling certain the traitor would not be in a main room, he opened the storage compartments while the other guards searched elsewhere. To his great pleasure, there was indeed an Unggoy in one of the compartments.

"I have located the traitor!" 'Befuwee said in triumph. He grabbed the Unggoy and pulled it out struggling. He took the traitor's weapon and threw it to the side. He heard someone board the dropship behind him. _Good, another to witness the execution._ He raised his rifle, ready to smash the traitor's skull, when a strong hand took his wrist. He turned to see a Sangheili dressed in the white armor of the Special Operations Forces.

"You shall not kill the traitor," the Sangheili said calmly, releasing his wrist.

"Yes, Excellency," he said at once, startled at the intervention. "May I question why I am not allowed the honor?"

"There is an Arbiter present in the complex," the Sangheili replied. "It is _his_ honor."

Although disappointed, he certainly understood the Arbiter's rights and did not object as the Sangheili took the traitor away.

7. Traitors

"I am afraid the holy armor could not be fully mended," 'Bepolee told the Arbiter with distress.

The Arbiter had just awoken from stasis, fully healed by a skilled Huragok, and had begun consuming energy supplements when the mechanic Kigu 'Bepolee arrived to inform him of his failure.

"Is it unfit for battle?" he asked, gazing at the armor before him. From his vantage, the suit appeared mended.

"I am afraid so, Arbiter," 'Bepolee said with shame.

Despite the servity of the news, he was not nearly as disappointed as he would have believed. Now he had learned the truth, he no longer desired to be the blade of the Prophets and felt great desire to simply become another warrior. _It is fitting,_ he thought to himself, _that the end of the Prophets would also be the end of their most trusted servants._

However, he could not simply end his life as the Arbiter; he had to help convince the whole of the Sangheili race of the Prophets'

treachery, and for such things he needed such a role of power. If the sacred armor was unfit, he needed to find a way to maintain his image as Arbiter without itâ€¦

"Bepolee, I will need armor to fight," he began. "Craft for me a new suit, one which all may recognize as holy. Do this and I will hold you in favor."

"I am honored, Arbiter," the mechanic said, clearly astonished at his orders. "I shall begin at once."

"Do so," he said, bowing his head in a dismissal. The Sangheili hurriedly left to preform his duties, leaving the Arbiter to his meal of protein crystals.

Miranda and Johnson, finding they had little to contribute, kept quiet as the Elites discussed their allegiance to the Prophets and the Covenant. It seemed to be going quite well, the 'High Councilor' seemed committed to following the Arbiter as they waged war with their once leaders. _Yes,_ she thought, _this new alliance could very well turn the tide of the war._ However, they were cautious about informing the whole of their squad, afraid a sudden change would inspire insurrection. For now only about a dozen trusted soldiers were filled in. She looked up as a blue-armored Elite stepped in, bringing a large holographic generator.

"Greetings, Excellencies," the Elite bade with a bow of his head, speaking in the slow purposeful English of most their kind.

"Greetings, Oymomy," Commander Setfethy returned. "I trust you have learned our purposes?"

"Yes, Excellency," he answered. "I look to our changing relationship with the humans with growing anticipation."

"Good," the Commander acknowledged. "You may procede," he gestured to the equipment.

"Yes, Excellency." The Elite positioned the machine in the center of the room and began setting it up, all the while taking curious glances at her and Johnson. The machine lit up as he activated it, and he stepped back with what appeared to be a frown on his features.

"Is there something wrong, Oymomy?" Setfethy asked him.

"I am fine," the Elite answered. "I am only troubled because the High Prophet of Truth has not broadcasted for nearly a _quarter_ of a unit. Normally, his encouragement is constant throughout a crisis." He motioned to the machine, currently displaying nothing.

"Another unit?" Johnson muttered to himself.

One of the two red-armored Elites assigned to guard them from possible insurrectionists glanced at him. "It is a standard unit of time," the Elite explained gruffly. "An equivalent to your 'space days.'"

They nodded in understanding. While on Earth a day was always 24

hours, the time varied depending on the planet. Therefore, the UNSC employed the use of the 'space day,' identical to an Earth day, to be used in all situations.

"Do not waste your concern on the High Prophet," Commander Setfethy said with an uncomfortable warble in his voice.

"Yes, Excellency," Oymomy said after a slight pause, and then inserted a disc into the display. After a few seconds, an image of an island supporting a Covenant cruiser appeared over it.

"The cruiser _Zealous Missionary_, damaged by battle, chose to rest upon this small island for repair," the High Councilor narrated. "Many of the traitors left to inspect Forerunner monuments on the mainland, leaving the ship somewhat open to attack. However, the island itself has been fortified. Any attack would be seen at once by their forces and soon defended against. Commander Miranda Keyes," he looked her in the eyes. "Long has your kind fought against the tools currently wielded by our enemies. It would do this council a great kindness if you were to share the secrets your kind possess of waging war."

She froze. To give away such information would be treason. On return to Earth, she would be sentenced to permanent induced coma. _Yetâ€|_ This cause was important. They needed to reach the Ark to deactivate the Halos, and to do that they needed a ship with slipspace engines. Also, the informal alliance they had made with these Elites threatened to break should she not aid them as requested. Against her better judgement, she cleared her throat. "I'll tell you what I know."

Jitji hung limp as the Sangheili carried him to the Arbiter's quarters. Grief filled him; he had not only failed his task, but had caused the deaths of several other Unggoy. Now he would suffer death as a traitor to the Covenant. _At least with less Unggoy there will be more food-drink for all_, the horrible thought went through him.

He heard cheering and opened his eyes to see a crowd of Unggoy gathered around the entrance to the leaders' quarters. Cries of 'Praise Forerunners, traitor caught!' and 'Kill traitor!' assaulted his ears. He looked among them and saw Tatat, his new leader, cheering for his death like all the others. He stared into his leader's eyes, trying to find any compassion, but found none. The Unggoy who had once supported his plan to save his brothers from starvation was replaced by an Unggoy who cried out for the death of a traitor. _I am a monster_, he thought with growing depression, closing his eyes.

The dimming voices of the crowd made him aware his captor had entered the leaders' rooms. He tried not to think about anything as he heard the Sangheili talk to each other.

"Opskitee, why have you brought this?"

"Bring the Arbiter at once; I have secured the traitor."

The Arbiter, having finished his rest, donned the broken armor and

strode back towards the High Councilor's quarters. He paused as he heard his radio speak.

"Fear not, warriors," the radio crackled. "The traitor has been captured."

Traitor? he thought in alarm. His thoughts leapt to 'Setfethee and the High Councilor; had one betrayed the other? He quickened his pace.

"Arbiter," called out a Sangheili down a corridor on his right. The Arbiter stopped to allow the red-armored warrior to approach him. "Greetings, Arbiter, I am Omin 'Pirztikee. I have been sent by Eito 'Opskitee to deliver a message."

"What is the message?" he asked with some apprehension. 'Opskitee's continued opposition to his alliance made him weary.

'Pirztikee bowed his head and recited the message. "'Arbiter, I have secured the Unggoy traitor. I ask that you join me in storage room 34, so I may give you the honor of sending it to eternal darkness.' That is his message."

"The traitor was an Unggoy?" he asked aloud, startled.

"Yes, Arbiter," 'Pirztikee answered. "It killed one of its own and attempted to kill Warrior 'Ulkolee."

His thoughts raced. Unggoy had long been faithful servants. It seemed an incredible concept—much like what he preached to his comrades. This was a time for accepting incredible concepts. _But it is not so_, he thought, _for what of the Unggoy Rebellion?_ He remembered his teachings well: the Unggoy once thought they could take over the Covenant and walk the path alone, and so had attacked the Hierarchy. The Prophets acting swiftly, created an Arbiter to force the Unggoy into submission and thoroughly punished them for their crimes. _Perhaps this traitor similarly lusted for power?_ But no, those traitors were not bound as their descendants were. Puzzled, he thanked the messenger and sought out 'Opskitee.

Unfamiliar with the layout of the Forerunner complex, he followed directions given to him by the messenger, leading him to the storage room. He entered, laying his sight upon 'Opskitee standing in triumph aside an Unggoy, who knelt on the floor. "Greetings, 'Opskitee," he said formally.

"Greetings, Arbiter," replied the white-armored warrior, his mandibles twitching in anticipation. "Arbiter," he started. "Here lies the truth of the Humans' evil. For what else could drive a loyal servant into darkness? What else could make him lose his trust?"

What indeed? the Arbiter wondered. Had he not been certain of the Humans' innocence, he would likewise suspect them at once. He looked down at the Unggoy and growled. "Tell me, traitor," he said. "Why did you betray us?"

The Unggoy flinched, saying, "Excellency, we Unggoy no have food-drink to feed all. We try go on next mission to bring back more."

"Clearly the creature has no knowledge of its own corruption," 'Opskitee interpreted.

The Arbiter frowned; the Unggoy's story was indeed perplexing. "Explain to me why your desire to feed your fellow Unggoy necessitated the death of a Sangheili warrior," he ordered the traitor.

"Sangheili go stop me, me seal in pit," the Unggoy explained. "Me no try kill, me try delay."

"And the Unggoy?" he asked, to some extent confused by the rationality of its explanation.

"Unggoy leader block exit, me no choice," the Unggoy answered. "Arbiter," the traitor began trembling as he spoke. "Me no care about own life, me only care for other Unggoy. Please, Excellency, bring back food-drink!"

He stared at the Unggoy with amazement. Only then had it occurred to him that if the Prophets were indeed false, that if the reasons which formed the Covenant were wrought with deceit, then perhaps all he knew of their history had been tainted with their lies. He ignored 'Opskitee as he blathered on about the evil Humans had brought with them, and instead spoke to the Unggoy. "Your name, Unggoy?"

"Me Jitji, Excellency," the Unggoy answered nervously.

"Servant Jitji," he addressed him formally. "Do you know why you must drink from the food-nipple?"

"To live, Excellency?" Jitji asked with obvious confusion.

"Your kind once ate from plants and animals, similar to the Kig-Yar," the Arbiter informed him. "Have you never wondered why you possess teeth?"

"No, Excellency," Jitji said.

"Unggoy have never been valued for their intelligence," he thought to himself as he continued. "Your ancestors committed a grave crime, Jitji, for they attacked the Hierarchy themselves. An Arbiter, a tool of the Hierarchy, was created to quell their insurrection." He thought back to his own rebirth and of the High Prophet of Truth using him to execute the leader of a group of heretics, people who had simply learned the truth. "The Unggoy were made to pay for their deeds and so the Prophets created the Milk—what you call 'food-drink'—to bind the Unggoy to the Covenant for all time. As history tells it, the Prophets wove obedience and honor into the Milk to cure your corrupt race.

"However, I have recently learned historical facts from the Oracle which undermine what I have been taught. Now, after contemplating the Unggoy Rebellion, I see the truth before me. The Milk has no power on its own, it is simply a tasteless liquid designed to feed and humiliate your race. You, having been raised on Milk, are no better than an Unggoy raised on meat. It is useless to starve your brothers, Jitji, therefore I will grant your wish and allow your kind to eat meat and plants once more."

"Thank you, Excellency!" Jitji cried, beginning to weep openly.

The Arbiter thought he understood: the Unggoy had calmly gone on its 'mission' knowing he would die in any case, but now he wept knowing his fellows would survive while he would not. _I was once like you, Jitji, _he thought. _Bowing before my executionerâ€¦_ The High Prophet of Truth had shown him mercy and transformed him into an icon of their power. It was a good strategic move, one that could aid him wellâ€¦ "I shall spare you, Jitji," he said, causing the Unggoy to stare up at him with amazement.

"Meâ€¦ thank you, Excellency!" Jitji managed to say as he shook with excitement.

"Arbiter!" 'Opskitee said with horror. "This Unggoy is a traitor! It must be punished!"

"You are correct," he agreed. "I cannot think of a faster way to die than as personal servant to the Arbiter. Come, Jitji." He turned and walked out.

Eito watched in horror as the Arbiter walked away with the grinning traitor at his side. Now he knew for certain: the Arbiter had been thoroughly corrupted by the Humans' evil. There was no way to reason with him nor, he reasoned, with any of those he had turned. The way to break the spell, he was sure, would be to slay the Humans. Despite his clarity, he knew he would never be able to slay them surrounded by the corrupted. His only choice would be to reach his brothers before they fell to the corruption, for he was certain he would not accomplish this task alone.

8. A Gratifying Rest

The Arbiter led the Unggoy to the leaders' chambers, feeling apprehensive about his actions. Had he made the correct decision? _Protecting the Humans is one thing, but forgiving a traitor?_ "Now, Unggoy, you are not to repeat anything you hear," he ordered him. "Everything discussed in this room is classified." He slid his hand down a strip of light projected at the side of the threshold, causing the door to slide open.

"Greetings, Arbiter," Commander 'Setfethee bade as he entered. "Are you well rested?"

"Well enough," he answered. "However, my armor could not be fully mended."

"Such I have heard," High Councilor 'Lafatee said with a trace of amusement. "Nearly all of our workforce has been tasked to craft you a new suit, one which appears to be recycled from that of a Special Operations officer."

"I apologize for diverting the unit's resources," he began, only to have the Councilor cut him off.

"Not at all," he said. "If it were not for the Arbiter, we would all be dead now."

Feeling appreciative of the praise received, he turned his attention to the upcoming battle.

"Have we achieved the necessary means to engage the Jiralhanae? The _Brutes_?" he asked, switching to the Human term for their race.

"Yes, Arbiter," 'Setfethee answered. "Commander Keezz has been most helpful; she has provided us with code we may use to disguise our ships."

He noticed the alien shift her balance â€" what he believed to be a sign of discomfort. _Perhaps she dislikes praise,_ he reasoned. "Promptly after our equipment is prepared, we shall move," he decided. "What is our force comprised of?"

"6 Seraphs, 7 Phantoms, 2 Apparitions," 'Setfethee stated. "Approximately 250 _Elites_ and _Grunts_, 6 _Hunters_, and two Humans," he glanced over at them. "I know not what has become of our deployed skirmishers."

Unfortunate numbers, he thought. _As for the Humansâ€|_ "Perhaps it would be wise for Commander Keezz to remain here during the battle," he suggested, looking at her for approval. "Because no true treaty yet exists between our races, it would be most regrettable should the first Human leader to consent fall in battle."

Keezz sighed. "Agreed." She looked at her companion, "Jahnsen, you up for it?"

He straightened, pulling his rifle to his side. "Yes, ma'am." He looked at the hologram depicting their target, before turning to him and asking, "So why can't you call up your buddies and ask for back up?"

"High Charity began polluting the battlenet not long after our struggle began, corrupting our transmissions," 'Setfethee answered for him. "Presumably, no radio signal outside this complex will be received. The Prophets have granted the _Brutes_ many giftsâ€|"

Is that so? The apparent lack of communication between the various Sangheili units he had encountered became clear. Remembering 'Opskitee, he spoke, "Commanders, I believe warrior 'Opskitee to be a vulnerability. Repeatedly has he spoken against me, against the truth. Just now, he came to me claiming the _Grunt_ traitor was a result of my alliance with the Humans." At his side, the Unggoy shifted uncomfortably.

"Officer 'Opskitee is the sole survivor of my elite Special Operations unit," 'Setfethee said, his expression darkening. "Despite his unfaltering obedience to the Oath, he has proved his worth. I will not cast out a loyal warrior simply because he has shown grief after we abandoned our teachings in favor of that which the Oracle has preached."

"Very well," he agreed after a tense moment. "I believe you _would_ understand him better than I."

"Indeed," answered 'Setfethee calmly, but with an intense look in his eyes as he stared at the Arbiter. After a moment he sighed, closing

his eyes. "Do inform the Arbiter of the Prophet, High Councilor," he requested, reopening his eyes when he had regained control.

"Very well," 'Lafatee muttered, obviously annoyed at being ordered by a Ship Master. "The _Brutes_ in control of the Apparition that attacked your Phantom were guardians of the Prophet High Councilor of Justice. In the last four cycles, the Prophet steadily has grown in power and influence. When the High Prophet of Regret was killed, it is probable that Justice sought a place in the Hierarchy. In what was likely an attempt to gain the High Prophet of Truth's favor, Justice presented his _Brutes_ with artifacts forbidden to races outside the Union, specifically the body shield and sword."

Those double-crossingâ€| "The High Prophet of Truth gifted Tartarus with a powerful body shield, one only Jahnsen's particle beam could penetrate," he noted. "Do you suspect our enemies at the _Zealous Missionary_ possess such tools?"

"We simply do not know," 'Lafatee answered. "However, it is, of course, best to be alert."

"Do you not realize?" asked 'Setfethee in a rather condescending tone. "The crimson rifles carried by the _Brutes_ are no doubt the product of the Prophets' influence. Did it simply not strike either of you as unusual that the beasts could create such weapons so soon after the conflict began?"

He looked down at his own rifles, attached magnetically to his hips. He had not even stopped to wonder. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the Unggoy, Jitji, also examining them with the infamous fatigue suffered by all his kind. _There is no doubt that his failed 'mission' intensified such fatigue._ "Jitji," he spoke to the Unggoy, who swiftly looked up at him. "Return to your pit and rest. You can do nothing for me now."

"Yes, Excellency," returned the Unggoy. He wasted no time following his order.

Jitji resisted the urge to drop and walk on four legs as was natural for him. _I answer to the Arbiter now. I must remain respectable._ He grinned to himself. What a glorious event it had been! He had sat waiting for his execution, only to receive mercy. Not only had his life been spared, he had been given a great duty, one he was sure no Unggoy had ever been given. And his bretheren, freed from the bond of food-drink? He would surely have laughed in delight, were it not for the fatigue which clouded his thoughts. He had been more active for longer than he had ever been, and the effects pulled at him.

He paused as his radio spoke up with the Arbiter's voice, "Attention: I have forgiven the Unggoy traitor. He is now my personal servant; treat him with respect." _How glorious!_

He hurried to pit-1. The Sangheili guard scowled at him as he entered the airlock; clearly _he_ did not appreciate the Arbiter's mercy. He triggered the airlock and smiled as he breathed in the fresh methane. Never had it smelled so sweet. Removing his air-tank, he entered the pit.

What first caught his eye was the missing food-nipple. In its place stood a meat container. He sniffed the air excitedly, breathing in

the smell of the roasted flesh. _How wonderful,_ he thought, approaching. As he moved in, all other Unggoy flinched away from him. He stopped. "Why you hide?" No one spoke.

"Why?" he asked again.

After a moment, a Major approached him cautiously. "We hear you bad," he said bluntly. "We hear Humans bring bad spirits, turn you traitor."

"Me not traitor," he denied. "Me work for all Unggoy. Me work to feed us." He gusted at the meat. "Me forgiven by _Arbiter_. You think Arbiter bad?"

"Arbiter not bad," the Major decided. "You good." The Unggoy around him relaxed.

"Me Jitji," he introduced himself.

"Me Gedeg," the Major returned. He gusted at the container, "Hungry?"

He smiled and walked over to the container. He picked up a piece and examined it. After turning it over a few times, he realized it was a Kig-Yar forearm. Careful, he placed his mouth over the limb and attempted to use his teeth to scrape the cooked flesh off the bone. Unfortunately, much of it ended up on the ground.

"You learn how," Gedeg comforted him. "Just act like Kig-Yar."

He scooped up the meat. Putting it in his mouth, he carefully ground it with his teeth, and then swallowed. The texture felt strange and the taste was strong, but it was far better than food-drink had ever been. He kept repeating the process, somewhat easier each time, until his hunger was sated. "Thanks, Gedeg," he said. "Me rest now."

"Rest well, Jitji," the Major bade.

He entered his quarters and yawned. _It far too long day,_ he thought, curling up to sleep. Truly, most Unggoy would never spend so long without sleeping even a few moments. He drifted off, thinking of the Arbiter's mercy.

9. Power Shifts

"Behold, Arbiter," 'Bepolee said, unveiling his new armor on a gravity display. Each piece was held aloft so it could be examined from every angle. "Does it meet your Excellency's approval?"

He approached the display to appraise it. Although 'Lafatee had indicated it to be altered Special Operations armor, this was not obvious. While the Covenant Special Forces were known for their dresses of shining white or glittering black, this suit was a strong magenta reminiscent of Prophet blood – or at least depictions of it; the Arbiter had never seen such a thing for himself.

Following the second Age of Doubt, all created military armors of high-rank had the Abiri, symbol of the Great Journey, inscribed between the shoulders with a glowing texture to imitate the cleansing

flame of the Sacred Rings. 'Bepolee perhaps did not have such techniques at his disposal, for while the back plate bore the customary Abiri, various other holy symbols had been carved into its visage: the sword along the arms, the seven Sacred Rings (three on each shoulder, one upon the forehead). Yet, what caught his eye was the Kama, the symbol of Union, etched on the chest plate. It was fitting, for he was to create a bold new union in which Sangheili and Humans would join as one. _Yes,_ he thought with a mental smile, _this shall serve me well._

"Indeed it does, Major 'Bepolee," he acknowledged. "I shall whisper your name into the ears of leaders." He began to disrobe, first removing his helmet.

"One thing more, Arbiter," the mechanic halted him. He spread his arms to regard the suit with an act of glorification. "I have made some modifications to the shielding, enhancing its durability. Even the strike of a fully charged pistol shall not bring it down!"

"How did a simple mechanic come to learn such crafts?" the Arbiter asked skeptically, wondering if such a thing was even possible.

Abruptly 'Bepolee's demeanor changed; he dropped his arms and gazed at the floor with shame. "Forgive your servant, Excellency. I instructed a Huragok to enrich the body shield with the protective materials given to it by the Prophets. I beg you to consider sparing this unworthy one."

Upon reflex the Arbiter looked upon his display with contempt. _To think I would forgive an act so __sacrilegiousâ€¦|_ But of course it was not so. _For the Prophets are the enemy,_ he reminded himself. With that knowledge, the mechanic's act was most loyal. "Yes," he said, seeing the glorious potential this offered. "I shall indeed spare you. Tell me, Major, can your Huragok apply this enhancement to the shielding of others?"

'Bepolee easily ascended from his groveling state, and looked the Arbiter in the eye. "Yes, holy one. The Huragok can recreate anything they have seen but once."

"Then have your Huragok swiftly see to the shields of the greatest number of warriors, starting with the leaders," he instructed. "While the Huragok works, I wish for you to design body shields for the races of Lekgolo, Unggoy, and Human."

Visibly surprised, the mechanic dipped his head in a bow as he took his leave. "Yes, Arbiter."

Kigu 'Bepolee laughed to himself in delight as he strode towards his workstation. The rumors were indeed true: the Arbiter sought to wage war against the Prophets! Why else would he defy law and Oath so blatantly? _Foolish one,_ he thought. _The prophecies held within the Writ of Union make it clear that should the Prophets and Sangheili do battle, none shall be victorious._ However, the Arbiter's folly gave him opportunity.

He had installed a device inside the armor that would, upon receiving

a seven tone signal he would broadcast, shut down the shields. By their own great strength, the Jiralhanae would surely see to the Arbiter's demise. _When the true leaders take power, I shall tell them how I deceived the traitor,_ he thought. _I may yet become a Ship Master._

Of course, he would not build any more of the Huragok body shields; he was no heretic. He would merely attempt to design the lawful body shields for the rest of their forces, albeit slowly. _However, I shall _not_ design shields to conform to the structure of the Human filth,_ he thought vehemently. As for the Huragok he had used to copy the technology? A small computer error would ensure the savant's name be misplaced, allowing it to disappear amongst its brethren. _I am brilliant,_ he chuckled to himself.

Jitji woke from his most enchanting slumber as he felt an Unggoy shake him. He opened his eyes to see Gedeg.

"Arbiter want you," he was informed. "Soon time to fight."

He lifted himself off the small cot, feeling very refreshed. He turned to dress himself in his subordinate orange armor, only to see it replaced by the gleaming white dress of a Special Operations Unggoy.

"Minor Sangheili bring in while you sleep," Gedeg explained.

Jitji let his eyes travel over the sleek metal surface, taking in every groove. _Who would have thought I would ever stand by the feet of the Arbiter?_ Slowly, savoring the moment, he lifted the garment, and began to dress. He giggled to himself as he strapped the cool metal to his bodyâ€| then froze. _What if this was Lamal's?_ His thoughts went to the tough Unggoy he had sentenced to death by imprisoning him in an airtight methane pit with a Sangheili. _Did his eyes once admire this garment? Did his hands once pull these straps tight?_ The thought made him queasy. He tried to settle his thoughts as he felt the half-digested Kig-Yar meat threaten to leave his stomach.

"Arbiter waits," Gedeg insisted.

"Yes," he agreed, forcing himself to remain rational. He made his way to the airlock, only to stop as Gedeg called to him. He turned and was shocked to see the Major bowing to him as if he were a Sangheili. "Why you do this?" he asked in bafflement.

"Never Arbiter forgive Unggoy, never take Unggoy as aide," Gedeg explained, still gazing at the floor. "You blessed Unggoy. It honor to know you." As he spoke, all other Unggoy in the pit bowed deep.

Jitji blinked in astonishment. He, the traitor of the Covenant, blessed? It seemed an incredible concept. To be bowed to by his brethren as a delegate of the Arbiter, of the _Prophets_ even. What to say? 'Thank you?' _No, the Arbiter never thanks his followers,_ he thought. _If I truly am as blessed as they think, I must act accordinglyâ€|_ But how? "Farewell, brothers," he said at last, hoping his words were adequate.

"Farewell, Blessed One," Gedeg returned, solemn. He and the others did not cease their display until after Jitji had closed the airlock.

He blinked rapidly, trying to wake up from what was obviously a dream. _An Unggoy does not rise from Minor to Blessed in the span of a single unit! _But, of course, he did not wake up. Refusing to think about such confounding things, he strapped on his tank and left the airlock. He ignored the glare from the Sangheili guard, and stepped confidently toward the leaders' quarters. _Blessed or not, I am very lucky,_ he thought with a smile under his mask.

Sergeant Major Johnson tried not to laugh when the Arbiter returned wearing bright pink armor. He knew the Covenant saw the color as fierce and powerful, and yet the sight of one of their most respected leaders emerging in such a getup put an awful strain on him as he fought hard not to giggle. Biting his lip, he turned away to look at his Commander. Her tense expression was enough to calm him down, and he turned back to the Elites with earnestness.

"I believe my new armor to be quite adequate," the Arbiter was saying, spreading his arms to display various decorations.

"It will suffice," the white Elite with the fancy helmet agreed. "It is a pity for the holy armor to have been wrecked; it has been used by the Arbiter since the first age of conversion."

"That was an Arbiter who served only the Prophets," the Arbiter answered. "That Arbiter is now dead, and I stand in his place. It is fitting that I now take on a new form, for which I may serve my race."

The Elite in the helmet (Laflity?) looked at him sharply. "Indeed," he said slowly, as though having come to a realization. "If the Prophets are our enemiesâ€| then you have no authority here. As the sole surviving member of the Elite High Council, I shall take control of our coalition. Will you submit to my command?"

The Arbiter visibly tensed and did not answer. Every Elite in the room slid a hand over the rifles attached to their sides. Johnson tightened his grip on the alien sniper rifle, ready should a fight break out. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Commander Keyes' hand move to her needler. He slipped a hand into his grenade pouch and, grasping a plasma grenade, held his finger over the primer. _What side are we on, anyway?_

Fortunately, no fight occurred. The Arbiter knelt on the ground and declared himself subordinate to Laflity. "Good," the Elite stated, and the room relaxed. Letting out a hissing breath through his teeth, Johnson removed his hand from his pouch. "Now," Laflity began, as the Arbiter stood. "Is there anything you have neglected to inform me?"

"â€|Yes, Excellency," the Arbiter answered. "The mechanic who created this armor, of his own will, placed within it the superior shielding systems used by the Engineers. I instructed him to provide every one of our warriors with such shielding, including Hunters, Grunts, and

humans."

Laflity looked over at him and Commander Keyes distastfully. "Giving humans Prophet technology? Even if we may become allies, I do not wish to freely offer such things." He called to one of the blue Elites, "Minor, do tell this mechanic to cease this foolish task at once."

"Yes, Excellency," the blue Elite said shortly, leaving quickly.

"Now, Arbiter, you will lead the attack on the _Zealous Missionary_. Take control of the vessel by any means necessary. When you do so, return to this complex to transfer all remaining personnel to the cruiser."

The Arbiter bowed his head respectfully, "Yes, Excellency." He began to turn away, but was halted.

"One thing more, Arbiter," Laflity called. "I will leave the Grunt alone, but do not make further decisions regarding traitors without my consent."

"Yes, Excellency," the Arbiter answered obediently.

Johnson frowned. He understood the Arbiter's desire to relieve his comrades from the unnecessary burdens placed on them by the Prophets, yet he felt the Arbiter's act of promotion given to a recognized traitor to be quite incompetent. A soldier of the UNSC wouldn't be able to commit an act of treason without finding themselves caught in a living death of perpetual comatose. _Exactly what the damn bastards deserve!_

Jitji waited outside the room where the leaders had gathered. Despite his new 'status,' the guard had insisted he wait for the Arbiter to emerge. He chuckled to himself. _Even if I were blessed, Sangheili would never care._ He came to attention as the door slid open. From inside stepped out a Sangheili wearing an unfamiliar suit of armor, the rich pink of Prophet blood. He peered up at the Sangheili curiously. _What manner of rank does this symbolize?_

Noticing the Halo carved into the helmet, he lowered his eyes away from those of the clearly holy warrior. As he slid his gaze down, a pattern of scars on the Sangheili's chest caught his attention. The marks were quite clearly deliberate, for they made a glyph from the language of the Prophets. _Any Sangheili who receives such an honor must surely be a grand warrior!_

"Are you ready, Jitji?" asked the Arbiter; for that was, of course, who the mysterious Sangheili was.

The Arbiter has shed his ancient and holy armor? Jitji blinked in surprise. _And the glyph is the Mark of Shame!_ Embarrassed he was unable to recognize his new leader, he quickly answered, "Yes, Excellency. Me more awake than ever."

And he knew it was true. The small rest had greatly lessened the lingering tiredness inside him, to the point that he felt he could

look upon things with a new light. The gray walls of the Forerunner complex now gleamed with hidden details; he studied the small imperfections in the metal with interest. Such a thing could be quite useful in a battle capacity. _A product of the Arbiter's good will, _he assumed. _Is this a gift given to all who follow the Arbiter?_ _Truly the Prophets are wonderful!_ _â€|Or perhaps it is a sign I am blessed?_ He ignored the stray thought, deeming the whole concept ridiculous.

From behind the Arbiter, a Human holding a Kig-Yar rifle stepped forward. He yelped at the sight, and groped for a weapon, but found none attached to his new armor. Such an image was something out of his nightmares.

"Calm yourself," ordered the Arbiter. "This Human is an ally. Indeed, I have trusted Jahnsen with my life, and would do so again."

"_Yeah, it's nice to meet you too,_" the Human mocked in its English. While it may not have fully understood their conversation, it still managed to realize it was being spoken about.

Utterly unsure how to respond, Jitji settled on: "Yes, Excellency."

Eito watched the Arbiter as he and his 'pets' strode off toward the Phantoms. _Filthy verminâ€|_ It was because of them he had to slip about in secret, merely to speak the truth. It was because of them that the Arbiter, the High Councilor, and the Ship Master all sought war upon their lords. _Soon, _ he promised. _Soon they will all come to their senses._ He had already spoken to several people throughout the complex, even the lowly Unggoy, to inform them of the rampant evils brought by the damned beasts. All he had spoken to were quite receptive_. Indeed, even should I fall in battle, I have faith in the knowledge that my brethren shall uphold the Prophets before all else._

Soon, the Humans would perish.

10. Zealous Missionary

"Board the _Exalted C__ourier_, Jitji," he said, nodding over at the Phantom they would use. They stood at the bottom of an entry shaft, preparing for their imminent battle. Unlike the time of their arrival, the surrounding area was brightly lit with several dozen light markers. "Jahnsen," he began as the Unggoy walked off, "Are you satisfied with your particle beam rifle? We have a good supply of weapons," he added, perhaps inaccurate in his claim, for truly he knew not the store accumulated by these Sangheili.

"I'm good," the Human answered. "All's the same, I'd rather take these _Brutes_ on from a good distance."

He nodded his head in acknowledgement. "At barest, allow us to recharge your rifle to its full capacity," he ordered, carefully dressing his command in the guise of a request. It would not do to anger the brash Human, however, it was necessary to ensure all equipment was fit before engagement. "Tell the Unggoy to power your

weapon, and then procede to board the Phantom," he directed Jahnsen to a cluster of orange-armored Minor Unggoy gathering supplies.

After making sure Jahnsen would indeed follow his instructions, he re-entered the complex to search the armory. Brushing aside the Minor Unggoy praising his presence, he opened the storage crates. _Good,_ he thought, finding the object of his pursual. He crossed back into the shaft and, taking a short gaze around the shaft, strode toward the transport.

"Arbiter?" a voice called from behind.

He stopped, turning to see Major 'Pirztikee, the veteran who had delivered a message from 'Opskitee, holding Tartarus' gravity hammer. "Your hammer, Excellency," he said, holding it out to him.

"No, no," he said, shaking his hand in a refusal. "This hammer is but a prizeâ€¦" But then it occurred to him the value of such a weapon. This was the Fist of Rukt, a name referencing a Sangheili of legend, one of the first Arbiters. This had been given to Tartarus by the Hirearchs themselves, and it had shown itself to be of considerable strength. He felt his muscles tense as he remembered being struck by the hammer. _In my hands, this could be considerably useful._ "Thank you, Major," he reconsidered, accepting the weapon.

"I am quite glad to assist, Arbiter," 'Pirztikee said with a bow. "If there is any more I may do to serve you, you need only speak."

He was about to simply dismiss him, when a thought struck him. "Actually, I do require a sniper spotter. Are you qualified?" The question was purely a formality, for all Sangheili higher than Minor were trained to accept any position with ease.

"Indeed, Excellency," the Major replied eagerly.

"Good," he said. "You will join the Human Jahnsen."

For an instant 'Pirztikee's face lapsed into a quick series of emotions, including disgust and outrage, but then it vanished into the carefully controled expression of a subordinate. "Yes, Excellency," he said with little enthusiasm.

"I shall see you on our Phantom, _Exalted C__ourier_, " he said as a dismissal. Turning away from 'Pirztikee, he stepped toward the vessel. He ran his hands lightly over the handle, feeling for the thin grooves which would control the hammer's gravity functions. His fingers tingled as he passed a particularly potent line, and he made a mental note to include that path in his strokings. _The power of Rukt in the hands of a new Arbiter,_ he thought with the beginnings of a smile.

Johnson, finally managing to communicate with the timid Grunts, watched as they hooked the alien sniper rifle up to a machine. _Is that how they do it?_ As far as he knew, the UNSC had not been able to determine how the battery cells of Covenant weapons were recharged or replaced. He hoped his helmet recorder was working, but had no way to check with Covies all around. Alliance or not, he was going to

take every opportunity to gather intel while he could.

"Gun ready, Excellency," a trembling Grunt squeaked in its broken English. Barely able to carry it, two of them offered the particle beam rifle.

Grunting a thanks, he accepted the rifle, and walked over to the dropship indicated by the Arbiter. He hesitated before stepping beneath the Phantom's gravity lift. _I don't think I'll ever get used to this alliance,_ he thought as he rose into its troop bay. Inside was only a white Grunt, standing alert inside a dark strip which spanned the center. From its unsurprised behavior at his presence he assumed it was the traitor, who he had met earlier. He surveyed the many circles lining the walls, unsure of the Covenant troop placement custom. Because of the obvious anti-human bias, he knew he would likely be placed alongside the Arbiter, and he decided to stand in a circle close to the front. The Grunt stared over at him. "How you doing?" he snapped at it.

The Grunt blinked. "Me well," it squeaked, apparently mistaking his comment for a real question. It continued to stare.

"What, never seen a human before?" he asked, trying to get it to stop. _Idiot Grunt._

"Me noâ€|" it paused, apparently trying to find the right words. "Noâ€| see human when not fight," it got out.

He made a mental note to avoid using sarcasm when speaking to Grunts â€" they just can't get it. "Well, let me tell you a little bit about human culture," he said, trying unsuccessfully to not get frustrated. "It's _rude_ to stare at people."

Understanding finally, the Grunt chose to stare down at the floor. _About time,_ he thought. Hearing the grav lift, he turned to see a red-armored veteran Elite rise into the bay. It glared over at him and slowly approached, bowing its head in what he took to be a greeting.

"Johnson," it said in slow, brutal tones. "I am Majorâ€|" The Elite said something that sounded to his ears somewhat like 'Omen Peer Sticky.' "I have been assigned to you as a sniper spotter."

No way I'm going to remember that name, he thought, slightly intimidated. He grunted in acknowledgement, "Hm. Well, welcome aboard, 'Sticky.'" _That fixes that._ The Elite scowled at having his name mangled, but thankfully said nothing more. It stepped into the adjacent circle, letting out a snort of contempt. _Well, this is fun,_ he thought sarcastically. _No Marine would ever get this uptight after a small joke._

And a spotter? He was not a professional sniper. The instructors at the Reach Naval Academy had trained him to be very versatile, able to use whatever weapon he had available, but he did not have the necessary training to be an accomplished sniper. _On the other hand,_ he theorized, _Perhaps the Arbiter just wants me out of harm's way until a proper treaty can be written._ With that in mind, he decided to hold off from objecting.

He turned again as two Hunters rose up the grav lift, and moved to

stand in the center with the Grunt. Wrinkling his nose at the smell produced by the big cans of worms, he was grateful to see the Arbiter, along with six Elites, enter the craft. _There's been enough awkward conversation._

The Arbiter, hefting the white Brute's emmense battle hammer, walked across the length of the Phantom to stand in the circle across from him. "Johnson, Peer Sticky," he nodded to them in turn. "I trust you have become aquainted?"

"Yeah," he started to say, only to be cut off be a terse "Yes, Arbiter," from Sticky. He scowled, clearly the Elite no more liked the notion of their partnership than he did.

"Good," the Arbiter said. "I was unable to convince the High Councilor to produce a body shield for you, Johnson; however, please accept this as a token of my graditude." He temporarily set down the hammer, and reached a hand over his shoulder to remove an object from his armor, and held it out to him. It was a short, thin strap with a white metal disk protroding from its middle â€" a Jackal's shield generator.

For a moment he was unable speak his excitement at such an oportunity. How many times had he been driven to great annoyance by the buzzards' shields? How many men had they lost due to their own lack of shields? Eagerly accepting the gift, he strapped it to his forearm as he had seen Jackals wear them. Curious to see it in action, he jerked his arm, causing the five-foot shield to abruptly spring out from the disk. He sharply exhaled as he compensated for the new weight, barely managing to hold onto the rifle. "Should come in handy," he remarked, grinning for the first time since the Flood attacked the _In Amber Clad_.

Aboard the Phantom _Noble Message_, Eito 'Opskitee stood at attention along with twelve other Special Operations Sangheili, and two Lekgolo relaxing in the center strip. Unlike he with his shining white armor, however, the Sangheili around him wore the lesser black suits of a mere stalking unit. Due to his own superior abilities, he had been assigned control of this unit by the Arbiter. _Perhaps he wishes to keep me from educating the mightiest warriors? It matters not, for this wicked spell shall soon be undone._

He shifted his weight as the _Noble Message_ began its ascent, and raised his hand so the others could see. When he was certain all paid heed, he made a gesture to turn off their radio transmitters. Nearly all obeyed his command at once, stroking their helmets to disable the devices. Two simply stared at him perplexed, but, perhaps out of curiosity rather than obedience, eventually relented. The Lekgolo ingored their exchange as their kind always did.

"What is it you wish, Excellency?" one of the officers asked him after it was certain none would hear beyond the troop bay.

"To follow my Oath," he answered diligently. "To assist the Prophets in any way, to ensure one day we will walk the path to godhood together. Does any one of you disagree?"

"Certainly we do not, Excellency," the officer said, puzzled. "Is

that not the wish of every member of the Covenant?"

"Tragically, some of us have been deceived by foul spirits," he informed them sorrowfully. "The Arbiter, the blade of the Prophets, has allowed the filthy Humans to whisper in his ear. Our once hero, the embodiment of the Prophets' wishes, has fallen from his grand highth and descended into the depths of sin. For the Arbiter does not merely wish to cease our eradication of the Human menace, he indeed intends on committing an unthinkable crime no civilized being would even contemplate: _war on the Prophets_"

Every warrior instantly became alert, even the Lekgolo turned in his direction. The worm colonies rarely, if ever, showed any interest into matters outside their own species, and to have these two listening to the truth was surely the sign of a higher being. _The Forerunners are on my side,_ he thought.

Jitji stood silently beside the Lekgolo, waiting for the attack to begin with a hint of nervousness. He had been trained to kill Humans, not Jiralhanae. Before he had fled to the Forerunner complex, he had watched a single Jiralhanae kill two Major Sangheili within the span of fourty heartbeats. He felt his own heart speed up as he thought about it, and willed himself to relax. _I will do the Arbiter no good if I cannot function._ He uncomfortably shifted the fuel rod cannon blanced on his shoulder. While he was glad he had been given perhaps the only weapon effective against such creatures, did it have to be so _heavy_?

"Hey, Arbiter!" the Human, Jahnsen called out.

He shivered. It was not right keeping a Human aboard, having it behaving like a real person. _What is going on? Has the Arbiter really been corrupted by their evil?_ His first instinct was no, the Sangheili seemed far too calm to be possessed by spirits. _Then why does he bring Humans here?_ he continued to wonder.

"Yes, Jahnsen?" the Arbiter answered, turning his head to regard the creature.

"What's that you said earlier about this Halo's Monitor being held by the Flood?" the Human asked.

Flood, he thought with another shiver. According to the stories swapped by feeding Unggoy, which admittably tended to stray from the original history, no force had damaged Covenant forces as great as the Parasites at the now lost Halo. _Or was that the Demon? The Heretic?_ He closed his eyes, trying to remember the details. Regardless, the Parasites were certainly a fierce and plentiful race. Their very presence upon this Halo had been enough to throw the Covenant into chaos. He reopened his eyes as he heard the Arbiter reply.

"Soon after I retrieved the Icon," the mighty Sangheili paused for perhaps ten heartbeats before continuing, "Tartarus took it from me, and then cast me into the great shaft. When I awoke, I was held in the grasp of the Parasite leader, along with the crimson Oracle, the Demon and the High Prophet of Regret."

"Hold on," Jahnsen interrupted him, "The Flood have a leader?"

Jitji's head spun at the wealth of knowledge the conversation contained. _Tartarus betrayed the Arbiter?_ From what he was told, the Sangheili-Jiralhanae conflict arose when the Jiralhanae, already given the role of honor guard, chose to take control of the High Council, but _Tartarus_ was the High Prophets' own servant. _How could a person granted more power than even an Arbiter be capable of committing such a terrible crime?_ He hastened to listen as the Arbiter responded.

"So it appears," he said. "The creature consisted of massive tentacles, one of which had been reconstructed for use as a mouth. The Parasite spoke to myself and the Demon, urging us to stop the Prophets from animating the Sacred Rings, lest we suffer the fate of the Forerunners."

A Parasite leader? he registered the thought with horror. The creatures were terrible enough if they were mindless animals, but a thinking army of Parasites made them far greater than he could have imagined. _The creature even sought to inspire heresy in the Arbiter? A true creature of evil_. Yet, a part of him wondered if there perhaps was some downside to the Great Journey; he quelled that thought at once.

"Huh," the Human grunted. "What's a Demon?"

_A horrible monster that could slaughter hundreds of Covenant warriors without sustaining injury, _Jitji thought with a shudder. _By that definition, does that mean the Parasites as a race are Demons?_ he wondered. _I suppose so, _he decided. _However, I will not refer to them as such before the Council declares them so._

"The Demon is the greatest of your warriors," the Arbiter explained. "I believe his name to be Master Chief."

"'Master Chief' is his rank," the Human corrected him. "The man's name is Spartan-117. What did the Flood thing want?"

Master Chief Spartan-117 The name seemed to echo through his head. This was the one true danger the Humans presented, a creature perhaps only slayable by a Prophet-blessed warrior. _Maybe this is why the Human is here, _he thought, _To give valued information._ But then, why keep it alongside warriors and not chained in a cell? _Maybe if it believes us to be allies, it would give information more readily than if it knew we are enemies?_ he answered himself. _That must be it._

"The Parasite spoke to us of the Prophets' treachery, of leading us to our deaths," the Arbiter continued. "It pronounced us allies and sent us each to a location it believed may have held the Sacred Icon. I was sent to the Control Room; I know not where it sent the Demon. The Master Chief," he corrected himself.

So the Parasite believed it could do greater harm not by killing the Arbiter, but by corrupting his values and sending him against the Covenant How unusual, and yet interesting.

"High Charity," said the Major Sangheili standing beside the Human.

"Forgive me for listening, Arbiter. In one of the last transmissions sent by the High Prophet of Truth, he is seen attacked by the Demon. However, in the next, there is not even a passing mention of him." He turned to regard the Human, "Sergeant, your warrior was undoubtedly slain by the honor guards."

The Demon slain? Finally this conversation began to seem uplifting. However, something about it bothered him. He pushed the thought aside to figure out later, so he could pay attention to the conversation.

"Maybe so," the Human admitted. "But if he's still alive, we're _not_ leaving without him."

Before any could respond, their radios crackled with the pilot's voice, filled with static, yet still understandable, "Arbiter, we are approaching the _Zealous Missionary_."

Patroclus growled at the uplink crate. It had been nearly a unit since the Sangheili uprising had begun, yet there was still no way to access the Covenant battlenet. The Jiralhanae reached for the controls and once more entered the destination code, only to have the machine let out an error beep. Anger filled him, and he grabbed the crate's sides, slamming the four-unit tall uplink crate into the rock wall three units away, careful not to send it over the nearby cliff.

"Be calm," snapped Bracchus. "It will do no good to damage equipment."

The crates have never broken before under such treatment, he thought, but held his tongue. Instead, he ran his claws lightly against his skin, cursing the biting insects which inhabited the Sacred Ring. _Only gods are to know what purpose they have._ He looked over at Bracchus, who looked as bored as he felt. They stood upon a small plateau overlooking a canyon, in which the gravity lift of the cruiser _Zealous Missionary_ was placed, with nothing more than an uplink and a storage crate. Due to the supposed threat of Sangheili insurrectionists, they had been posted as guard over the lift's base. Not that there was any point as far as he was concerned, for no dropship could land before being destroyed by the Seraph fighters patrolling the island. Truly, their job was a simple formality, nothing more.

Trying to avoid thoughts of his brothers feasting on Sangheili meat, he turned back to the computer resting inside the purple storage crate, and began to type a command. If he could not contact his bretheren for discussion, perhaps he could listen to the last broadcasts downloaded from the local battlenet upon arrival to the system. He grunted with satisfaction as the crate began to play a sermon from the late High Prophet of Regret. _May his spirit live in the Divine Beyond,_ he prayed.

"_The Forerunners, our most exalted lords, used the seven Sacred Rings to flee a doomed existenceâ€¦_" the High Prophet's voice played, undisturbed by the abrasive static which currently plagued communications.

"Patroclus, you lazy fool," Bracchus insulted him. "An Unggoy could be more patient than you!"

"Nonsense, an Unggoy would fall asleep at once or wander off in search of its nipple," he retorted. "Whereas I, as weary as you are, have the decency to activate a sermon so that we may together listen to the holy words of the Prophets."

"Curse your tongue," Bracchus growled. "With it you spin sin into virtue!"

Now this is much more interesting, he thought with a mental smile. He opened his mouth to further antagonize his partner, but stopped as he saw a Phantom dropship drawing close. "Look, Bracchus," he said instead, "Our brothers return." Upon learning how long the ship's repairs would take, many of the high-ranking Jiralhanae took dropships to the mainland to explore the ruins left behind by the Forerunners.

"Good," the other Jiralhanae acknowledged. "Perhaps the ship has been repaired?"

"You assume they are even capable of receiving a beckoning call," he pointed out. _If my own uplink fails, why should a Phantom's fair better?_ Then he frowned; the Phantom, instead of landing beside the lift, chose instead to perch its lift upon their plateau. Feeling a trace of unease, he grabbed a grenade launcher from the crate; at his side, Bracchus took and raised a carbine. _We must appear as professionals,_ he reassured himself as the reason for his distress. _When the captains see us, we will be praised._ He suddenly realized the uplink crate, continuing to replay the sermon, was detrimental to that end.

"Damn machine," he muttered under his breath. He turned to deactivate the console, and soon heard, not the laugh of Bracchus as expected, but the bark of a carbine. Forgetting the crate, he turned around abruptly to see a pair of Lekgolo descending from the lift. _Damn!_ He slung his grenade launcher over his shoulder, and darted to claim a carbine of his own. Against such a heavily armored foe, one needed a precision weapon. He raised the weapon, sighted, and fired. The green bolt struck the traitor's armor and simply bounced off. The next instant, however, Bracchus' bolt passed cleanly through the 'neck' of his target. "That one was mine," he growled, as the swarm stumbled.

"Down, fool," Bracchus snapped, ducking behind the uplink crate.

Seeing a green glow fill the air, he threw himself to the ground, letting the discharge pass harmlessly over him. Gazing at the destruction caused by the plasma, he realized just how close he came to death. Even the sturdy uplink crate, all that shielded Bracchus, had taken heavy damage and was unlikely to survive another blast. _Fighting these cannons is too risky._ "We'll never win at such a distance," he declared, running toward the enemies fearlessly.

"Stop, you idiot!" Bracchus shouted after him.

The Lekgolo abandoned the use of their cannons at his approach, and

lowered their shields defensively. He eyed the sharp spines on their backs with caution, throwing aside the carbine in favor of the grenade launcher; its bayonet would be more useful at close range. The one Bracchus had injured swung its shield at him, and he jumped back and fired a grenade. The grenade passed under the shield, and bounced off the armor to finally detonate against the inside of the shield. He only had time to feel a glimmer of satisfaction as the swarm took a tumble, for he had the second swarm to dodge as it came at him.

He jumped backbehind the first swarm, and, careful to evade the spines, slammed the grenade launcher's bayonet between layers of armor and into the mass of worms. Orange blood spurted over him as the swarm fell at last. _Another vile traitor dead,_ he thought with pride, when he felt a violent impact crash into him and throw him several units through the air. _The other one!_ He hit the ground with a shuddering thump, feeling his bones crack.

He struggled to stand, ignoring the pain that filled him, and saw the Lekgolo was charging its cannon. He glanced around; he had his back to the cliff, no weapons, and the Lekgolo stood between him and anything useful. _May my spirit reach the afterlife and rest at the feet of the Prophets,_ he pleaded to the gods. Waiting for the Lekgolo to send him there, he was both surprised and delighted when the swarm was hit from behind, causing it to cease charging. _Bless Bracchus!_ Abandoning the civilized bipedal stance for the faster quadrupedal stance, he made a rush for the discarded carbine.

Under the light of the Phantom's gravity lift, the carbine was easy to spot. Grabbing the weapon, he raised it and aimed carefully at the swarm's neck. His finger began to pull the trigger, when he felt something hot land on his left shoulder. He turned his head to see a mass of pulsing blue flames: a hand grenade! The grenade detonated, sending a shower of plasma over his body. He turned his head to protect his eyes from the blast, but the effort seemed worthless, for he soon found himself unable to move. He could only watch as eight Sangheili descended from the dropship, and proceeded to attack Bracchus. Thankfully he did not have to watch long, for the world soon grew dim.

11. If I Had the Fist of Rukt

Stepping into the gravity lift, Johnson soon was faced with the stench of gutted Hunter. _Lovely,_ he thought sarcastically as he stepped around the corpse. They appeared to be on a rock ledge some twenty feet in diameter with a good view down on the base of the gravity lift holding up the Covenant ship, perhaps sixty feet below. Three alien corpses and two Covenant crates marked the area as a former Brute post.

The Elites scurried around, moving the corpses into the Phantom and out of sight. The one remaining Hunter seemed slumped over, and Johnson wondered if the walking tank was feeling grief at the loss of its partner.

"Johnson, Peer Sticky," the Arbiter called them over to the far end of the ledge.

He jogged over to keep up with Sticky's longer strides, and met the

pink-clad Elite over by a half-melted crate. "What's up?" he asked, refraining from using the 'sir' honorific. Although he was currently willing to follow the Arbiter's orders to promote the possible treaty, he drew the line at treating a mass-murderer with the same respect he showed his true superiors.

The Elite gestured to a small, bush laden patch of ledge beyond the sunken crate, "Here is where you shall rest, within the shadows of the greenery."

"Yes, Arbiter," Sticky said with fake enthusiasm.

Johnson merely nodded and moved to find a sheltered spot to lay down in the hedges. He watched with interest as another Elite handed Sticky a transparent pyramid with a ball of blue energy suspended in the center -- portable active camouflage. Recalling the standing order to retrieve any Covenant armor enhancement containers, he made up his mind to procure one if possible.

For now, though, he would follow the Elite's command. He would camp out in the bushes, and from afar he would kill their common enemies: Drones, Jackals, and Brutes. _Or Jiralhoony, or whatever the hell the Covenant word is._ He would temporarily forgive the creatures who butchered his species in the name of mad preachers who couldn't tell godhood apart from suicide, and he would fight in their civil war because the treaty was what was important. _It doesn't mean I have to like it._

Feeling guilty about having started to like the notion of their comradery, he began to silently recite each world destroyed by the Covenant. _Harvest, Biko, New Constantinople, Paris IV, Draco III, Eridanus II--|_ Thunder boomed ominously overhead. He looked up, and was glad the ship just covered their small ledge. With the cover offered by the cruiser, they would be kept dry if it began raining. _Thank God for small miracles,_ he thought bitterly. _You can't count on him for the big ones._

After placing Jahnsen and 'Pirztikee upon the ledge, his warriors worked hard to clean the area. With any chance fortune, any Jiralhanae would assume their guards had simply returned aboard the cruiser. When the site appeared to have been cleansed ideally, he waved them into the Phantom.

Shortly, it deposited them on the canyon floor beside the gravity lift. Eager to engage the enemy, his Sangheili warriors excitedly leaped out nearly before he even gave a command. They all stepped over to the lift, ready to enter. However, first he activated his radio to speak with the _Exalted Courier's_ pilot, "Stay close at hand, pilot. We will send for you if pickup becomes necessary."

After a short silence, he received a message so filled with interference he had to pause to understand it properly. _"Un-stood, Arb-we sh-ke-Zelo-ssionary-ift-our sigh-all times."_

Understood, Arbiter. We shall keep the Zealous Missionary's lift within our sight at all times, he translated in his head. It was quite apparent 'Setfethee had not been exaggerating when he had

described the communication difficulties faced by Sangheili forces. Anger grew when he thought of the disarray caused by the foul Jiralhanae; it would feel good to spill their blood. "Come now," he said to his warriors, "Let us begin our ascent."

His warriors followed diligently. As one, they stepped beneath the gravity lift. In the space of a single breath, he felt the pull of the lift. As it pulled them high above the ground, he caught a brief glimpse of the enemy Seraphs keeping a holding pattern around the island, before the lift deposited them in its cargo bay. The opening sealed underneath their feet, and they were slowly brought to rest there. He scanned the lift bay: one Wraith, one Shadow, no visible enemies.

"Seal the entrances," he ordered. The Sangheili hurried to preform the task, while Jitji and the Lekgolo formed a defensive formation around him should any enemy spring upon them.

"It is done," the warriors reported almost simultaneously.

"Inspect the vehicles," he then ordered. They promptly obeyed, splitting into teams to study the parts of the vehicles.

"All vehicles fully operational, Arbiter," one eventually reported.

"Your name, warrior?" the Arbiter questioned.

"Officer Owlú 'Derolee, Arbiter," the Sangheili answered.

He nodded, and turned to address all warriors, "Officer 'Derolee and the Unggoy Jitji shall remain here to guard our exit. The rest of us shall advance on the nearby cargo hold. I shall take a team of four Sangheili to infiltrate the corridors leading to the second level of the hold, while one Sangheili and the Lekgolo wait here. Upon my command, the Sangheili, alongside the solitary Lekgolo, shall make use of this wraith and attack the hold. Any questions?" The warriors remained silent. "Very well. Engage active camouflage."

He rested the head of the hammer against the floor, freeing his left hand. He stroked his wrist, activating the stealth technology. He smiled, knowing it would be unseen by his warriors. Honor though it was to wear the ancient armor, it was good to be back in a fully functional suit. He stepped over to a side doorway, the shuffle of hoofbeats informing him his squad was close behind him. A glance at his motion detector told him the Lekgolo was moving outside the view of anyone who happened to be lurking in the corridor. _Perhaps the High Councilor will allow the production of enhanced armor for the use of the Lekgolo?_ While many Sangheili still distrusted them, they had been loyal for Ages. _Now that we are to seek war on the Prophets, we must establish bonds of loyalty to our allies._

He opened the door, revealing an empty side passage. "Seal it behind us," he ordered. When it had been done, he moved on to the main corridor. Inside it, however, two Jiralhanae were walking side by side. They stopped, realizing the door had been opened by one under active camouflage.

"Sangheili stealth party," one yelled, raising its crimson rifle and firing into their passage.

He pressed himself against the wall, avoiding the beast's barrage. Similarly, none of his warriors were struck. He noticed a definite pattern in the Jiralhanae's fire, and crept from the side passage and snuck behind their backs. _It is time to see the Fist of Rukt wielded by the Arbiter._ He raised the heavy battle hammer and brought it swiftly down, smashing the firing Jiralhanae's skull and bringing him out of camouflage.

Its partner turned around, and he savored the look of terror which crossed its face. He stroked the hammer, activating its gravity functions, and with a smashing blow, propelled the beast into the side passage and into the sealed door, where it was subsequently fired upon by his Sangheili. He smiled as he heard its dying cries, and brushed pieces of skull off his hammer. _Yes,_ he thought. _It has been one long unit, but now the vicious beasts will pay for spilling our blood._

He slipped back into active camouflage, preparing to lead his warriors into the cargo hold, when his radio began to play what he assumed to be a message. However, pure static met his ears and he could discern no voice among it, although he could make out a few tones. "I do not hear you," he called into the radio. "Adjust your frequency if possible." He received no response. Deciding to ignore the transmission for now, he opened the door.

Omin 'Pirztikee was not happy. Not long after the Arbiter had left, the skies let loose a sudden torrential downpour. Although the Zealous Missionary shielded them from the rain itself, the water clattered down angrily not eight units away. The moisture so filled the air, he found it near impossible to smell anything. This excepted, of course, the stench of the Human pretending it was a Kig-Yar. "Damned Human," he muttered under his breath.

"What's that?" it asked, its eyes sliding over to look at him. "You have something to say?"

Did it understand our language? he wondered. _Perhaps it merely recognized its race's name and assumed an insult._ "I have no words to say to you," he growled in English.

"Look," it began, "I don't like you any more than you like me, but if we hold so much anger against each other it will hurt our functionality as a sniper team. Besidesâ€œ"

"Silence," Omin snapped, cutting off the Human in midsentence. His superior hearing had picked up something the Human's did not. "A Phantom approaches."

The Human appropriately fell silent. They waited, hugging the ground, as the dropship slowly slid into view. As soon as he saw it, he smashed the glass container and let the light-bending energy envelop him. Even with the added camouflage, he felt his insides quiver as the dropship drifted over to their plateau. If spotted, they would be burned away at once by the triple plasma cannons. He willed himself to lay as flat as possible, while the Phantom hovered ominously overhead.

After an eternity, the dropship drifted away to descend in the canyon near the lift. He let out a breath of air he had been holding inside his lungs. _Now I shall do my duty,_ he thought, raising a monocular to his eye. The device amplified the present light, allowing Omin to see the dropship clearly.

"Two Minor Jiralhanae leaving the ship," he reported. "Behavior suggests reconnaissance." The two Jiralhanae spread out, inspecting the area. Jahnsen held his fire, waiting for their superiors to make themselves visible. He watched through the powerful magnification scope as one of the Minors used a small handheld radio, certain their targets would soon appear. However, the Phantom simply rose in the air, flying back the way it came. The Minors stood on opposite sides of the lift, their crimson rifles at the ready. _A trap to draw us out?_ The Human continued to wait.

After a few minutes had passed, he heard the approach of another Phantom. He momentarily lowered the monocular as he watched it come into view. This one held a large grey package under its belly; he assumed it was a collection of Wraiths. Examining it with the monocular, however, he realized it was actually leathery flesh. Ten units above the ground, the Phantom dropped what he now realized was a monstrous creature. A loud thump echoed throughout the canyon as the creature impacted with the ground, spraying wet dirt over the canyon floor. It raised itself on its hind legs, reaching a height of nearly ten units. The Phantom rose and flew away, leaving the gigantic creature to slowly approach the lift.

"What the hell is _that?_" Jahnsen asked.

Never had he seen one, yet he knew its name instantly from his teachings. "That," he replied, not taking his eye off it, "Is a Sharquoi."

"Dangerous?"

"Exceedingly," he answered, wondering how the Human could not have known simply at a glance.

"It's mine," the Human declared, firing its particle beam rifle.

Omin watched as the beam struck the creature's eye, causing it to stumble. It roared in pain, green blood dripping from its wound. His heart sped up. That would have killed even the most robust Jiralhanae, but this creature seemed to defy such logic. The Jiralhanae, unsure of Jahnsen's position, began firing roughly in their direction. The plasma splashed harmlessly against the cliff side units away. The Sharquoi growled, a sound reminiscent of Human aircraft, and turned its ugly round head to follow the path of fire. He watched as its healthy eye narrowed, feeling dread seep through him. _It sees us!_

With a flash, Jahnsen fired a particle beam directly into the Sharquoi's remaining eye, blinding it. _Thank the Forerunners,_ he sighed in relief, as the beast stumbled and fell with a monstrous crash. However, that made him wonder: if the Forerunners guided a Human to help a member of the Covenant, thenâ€¦ _the Humans are not wretched in their eyes._ This profound thought was put aside as he watched the Sharquoi stand up once more. _It is blind and useless,_

he tried to reassure himself. Jahnsen fired once more, striking it in the center of its forehead.

Thick green blood dripped from all its wounds, creating the illusion it may have once possessed three eyes. It roared, sending the putrid smell of its breath in their direction, and then drove its hands into the wet ground. Pulling out hands full of soil, it began packing the mud together into a clump. _A Sharquoi mourning ritual?_

"Well, damn," Jahnsen said with a hint of fear.

"What is it?" he queried, increasing magnification in hope of noticing what the Human had. However, the Sharquoi began to lift the mass of soil, and he had to decrease to see it properly.

"Run!" Jahnsen cried. Engaging his arm-shield, the Human stood and ran to the wider and less dry portion of the plateau.

Unknowing the threat, he decided to trust the Human (what an odd concept) and ran alongside him. He looked back at the Sharquoi, now holding the dirt clump back behind it head similar to how an Unggoy would prepare to throw a grenade. With shocking speed, the beast hurled the dirt clump directly where they had been moments before. _It is true,_ he realized with shock. _The Human is in touch with the will of the Forerunners._

His shields took a hit, and he turned to see the Jiralhanae firing at him. He realized the oddly warm rain now covered his body shield a subunit from his skin, creating a silhouette they could see. Fortunately, their accuracy was poor and he was able to strafe and avoid the shots. He noticed they were not, however, firing at Jahnsen.

Do they think him a treasonous Kig-Yar? he wondered with amusement, looking at the Human hiding behind the golden shield. He then noticed he was trying to aim the rifle one-handed, using his left arm to hold the shield. "That is futile," he told him. "Not even Kig-Yar, _Jackals_, can do that." It was clear to him the Human was too small to operate the equipment in such a manner.

"Maybe you're right," Jahnsen admitted. "Kick at me. Don't hit me, but convince the _Brutes_ that I'm a dead _Jackal_."

He paused. _Such an act of deception would never be conceived of by a Sangheili._ He wondered if that was good or bad. His shields took a hit, and he remembered to strafe again. _Well, I doubt I could kill these things with only a plasma rifle,_ he thought, sharply kicking close over Jahnsen's head.

The Human quickly disengaged his shield and dropped to the ground. Slowly, to not reveal to the enemy he was alive, Jahnsen managed to creep into a sniping position. A flash from the barrel, and one of the Jiralhanae stopped firing. He chanced a pause to inspect the enemies with his monocular, and indeed one Jiralhanae was dead, the remaining one running to hide behind the immense bulk of the Sharquoi, which currently stumbled about the canyon blindly on all limbs.

"Can that hulk be killed with this rifle?" Jahnsen asked of him.

"I do not know," he admitted. "Warriors of my class do not interact with their race. However, I recall from my studies we dominated them through mass use of vehicle deployment."

Jahnsen let out a hiss through his teeth. "Always a new challenge to keep things interesting," he said sarcastically.

"Yes," he agreed, enjoying the odd humor. "The Jiralhanae would not want us to become weary."

He noticed the Sharquoi had managed to walk in a straight line, a line towards the gravity lift. "The Jiralhanae leads it!" He looked through the monocular, but could not see the fiend behind the great mass of the Sharquoi.

"I can't get a shot on 'em," Jahnsen reported, firing instead on the titan's wrist.

It reared back on its legs, roaring as green blood flowed freely from the wound. The Jiralhanae became visible, a streak of brown between the creature's legs. Jahnsen fired, catching the Jiralhanae in its belly and causing it to stumble back where it was out of sight. The Sharquoi brought its wrist to its mouth, and began to lick at its wound with a long black tongue. _Its saliva acts as a coagulant,_ he realized as the blood slowed.

"Do you see it?" Jahnsen asked.

He was about to comment on the Sharquoi's interesting biology before realizing Jahnsen, of course, was referring to the Jiralhanae. He decreased magnification, and spotted their prey crouching behind a small boulder on the other side of the gravity lift. He relayed this to Jahnsen, who fired a shot upon it. The beam sliced into its lower neck, and with a cry of pain, the Jiralhanae fell. "It has fallen."

"Two down," he replied.

Omin started to question the Human's meaning, when he realized the Sharquoi was walking toward the gravity lift. _Following the sound of the cry._ Jahnsen fired upon the base of its neck, causing it to stumble. However, the creature was strong enough to make it onto the lift's base. "No!" he exclaimed as it began to rise.

While Jahnsen made another futile attempt to kill it, he activated his radio. Adjusting it to send directly to the Arbiter, he called, "Arbiter, a Sharquoi comes for you!" However, nothing greeted his ears but sharp static.

In the gravity lift's cargo hold, Jitji waited beside a parked Shadow. Guard duty was a common task assigned to Unggoy, and he was quite accustomed to it. Normally he would pace back and forth to ensure he would not slip into unconsciousness; however, now all of the tiredness he once had was stolen from him, so he instead stood in thought.

He thought about the Arbiter's story of an Unggoy rebellion, of his kind forced to drink the Milk as punishment for attacking the

Hierarchs. _An incredible tale._ It was no secret his race was disorganized and cowardly compared to the Sangheili, which made the concept of Unggoy assaulting the Hierarchs seem quite doubtful.

_"The Prophets created the Milk to bind your race to the Covenant forever," _he remembered the Arbiter telling him. _"Within it, they wove obedience and honor. However, I have learned facts from the Oracle which undermine what I have been taught. The Milk carries no magic, it is merely designed to feed and humiliate your race."_ Thus were the Arbiter's words before letting loose their bonds to the food-nipple. The notion of Sangheili historical teachings being inaccurate intrigued him. _If this tale is at least partially false, what else may be?_ he wondered. He felt a desire to speak to the Oracle himself to ask it about other tales, but this was certainly impossible for an Unggoy â€" even a 'blessed' one.

His recent escape from drowsiness also intrigued him. While he had assumed it was a gift of the Arbiter's, now he became unsure. As the Unggoy in the pit had said, nothing like this had happened before. So how was an Unggoy to know it was the Arbiter and not something else?

It was surely not a sign of being blessed, so he wondered if perhaps the Kig-Yar meat had something to do with it. _In forcing us to drink Milk, the Hierarchs could have meant to keep us from it._ If the meat made Unggoy more aware, he could understand how constricting their food supply would protect the Prophets from insurgents.

Why would they have attacked the Hierarchs anyway? He wondered nervously if the meat had driven them to madness. Would he go mad and fire upon a fellow member of the Covenant? _If I'm even right about half of this,_ he chided himself. _Maybe I should ask the Arbiter?_ The thought unsettled him. _Maybe another Sangheili?_

He walked over to 'Derolee, who stood on the other side of the Shadow, and hesitantly asked, "Excellency, may me ask question?"

'Derolee scowled down at him. "Speak, _Unggoy_, " the Sangheili said, saying the name of his race as though it was profane.

This was a bad ideaâ€| "Excellency, why did Unggoy attack Hierarchs?" he nervously asked.

'Derolee closed his mandibles in surprise. Clearly he did not expect Jitji to ask such a question. Finally, he began to explain in a harsh tone, "â€|A large group of Unggoy in the first Age of Doubt refused to believe in the Great Journey, even daring to claim it was fabricated by the Prophets as a ruse! Ensnared by this delusion, they launched an assault upon the Towers of Ascension. Before they were quelled, the treacherous beasts managed to slay the 15th incarnation of the High Prophet of Truth! Were there no living High Prophets present to take the Rite of Ascension, the Covenant _itself_ may have ended that unit!"

Jitji trembled from the Sangheili's voice, at the rage used in his words. _To think my ancestors could have been so evilâ€|_ However, it seemed clear 'Derolee did not know the true source of their madness. "Excellency, me know Prophets true," he assured him. "Me not crazy

like them."

"Yet," 'Derolee said with rising anger, "You betrayed us, killed several of your brethren, merely to fill your stomach. You have convinced the Arbiter to free your kind from the fidelity of the Milk. Now you question me of the Unggoy Rebellion? What _are_ you planning, Unggoy!"

"Me plan nothing, Excellency," he insisted, fear beginning to rise. He shifted the heavy fuel rod cannon in preparation to drop it and run.

However, 'Derolee misunderstood and raised his rifle threateningly. "Take care, Unggoy. I could send you to the Shadow World before your finger could even begin to pull the trigger."

This is not going well at all! "Me not traitor," he tried to tell him. "Arbiter see truth, he forgive."

"The Arbiter has taken leave of his senses," 'Derolee responded. "He believes even Humans to be virtuous! I shall notâ€¦" He trailed off as the lift plate in the center of the room opened. "â€¦If you doubt your loyalty, know the Jiralhanae _shall not_ be merciful," he noted, engaging his active camouflage.

Jitji hurriedly activated his own, thankful for the new capability his armor provided. _Maybe if I attack the Jiralhanae, Excellency will know I am loyal?_ To his surprise and fear, the lift's occupant was not any race he knew, but a gigantic grey creature so large it had to squeeze through the lift door! In his terror, he managed to notice its eyes leaked the same green blood which coated its right wrist. _Attacked by Jahnsen, no doubt._

Its huge bulk scraped the ceiling, and threatened to crush Jitji as it spread throughout the hold. So he did what any Unggoy would do: he fled. Clutching onto his cannon, he ran for the open doorway. He overheard the sound of plasma fire, and when he had reached the safety of the hallway, he looked back to see 'Derolee sitting in the Shadow's turret, firing upon the creature. The creature, pieces of its flesh melting from the assault, reached out and grabbed 'Derolee from the turret.

"DRINOLâ€¦" the creature rumbled, gesturing toward itself with the claw that clutched 'Derolee. It then smashed the Sangheili against the floor, leaving a nasty smear of purple blood.

Jitji yelped in horror at the sight, and then cursed his tongue as the creature (Drinol?) turned at the sound. _I'll run,_ he thought as the head faced him. _I'll seek out the Arbiter andâ€¦_ No,_ he told himself instead. _I shall not run like a cowardly Unggoy, I shall fight and die as a Sangheili would. The Forerunners shall forever recognize me as a warrior, and I shall serve the Prophets themselves in the next life._ Drinol's mouth opened, his head rushing toward him as if to swallow him whole.

"Unstoppable!" he shouted the Sangheili warcry. "Aaahh!" The cannon rocked violently as he fired it. The rod flew past rows of sharp teeth to impact against Drinol's throat. The explosive green blast severed Drinol's head from his body, and Jitji leaped to the side as the head flew by to impact the wall behind him.

Slowly, hesitantly, Jitji approached the head. _Drinol is deadâ€¦_ by my hand!_ Amazed he had accomplished such a thing, he reached out to touch the thick, warm blood which streamed out of its neck to pool on the floor. The blood sparkled on his fingertips, its creamy green a stark contrast to the rough blue of his own flesh. Yet, he could see a strange sort of beauty in the liquid. _I have killed Drinol, my prey,_ he thought with a new pride and delight. _I am a warrior._

12. I'd Make Somebody Pay

The doors slid open, revealing an open walkway on which several Jiralhanae paced. The Arbiter gripped his hammer and strode forward into the mass of enemies, his motion tracker telling him his warriors were following.

When he had reached the end of the walkway, he turned to look across the hold. A Wraith and a Spectre were located on the floor, lined up toward the door. He glanced around at the slight shimmers of light indicating his warriors, and motioned with the hammer for them to spread out.

"â€¦And the Human called out for protection from its false god!" laughed a nearby Jiralhanae loudly.

"Fool!" its partner agreed. "What god would protect a Human?"

The Arbiter lightly clicked his radio, signalling for the Wraith/Lekgolo pair, as he chose his first target. He aimed the _Fist_ at the laughing Jiralhanae, and stroked the trigger line. The blue burst shooting from the weapon brought him temporarily out of camouflage, but it went unnoticed as the beast was shoved off the walkway to land crushed on the floor below.

Its partner looked up at the Heavens alarmed, perhaps pleading for mercy from its sin. The Arbiter laughed at this, and showed it the same mercy the Forerunners would. This time when he fired, the surrounding Jiralhanae saw him. Fortunately, before they could fire, his warriors attacked them from behind.

He glanced away from the battle to see the Wraith and Lekgolo had not yet entered. He activated his radio and quietly spoke to the Sangheili, "Is there a problem?"

"Arbiter," the reply came, _"There appears to be no way to open the door from our side."_

He cursed his lack of knowledge of capital ships; it had been too long ago he served aboard one. "Be ready," he spoke into the radio, "I shall find a way to open it." He spied a holo-panel beside the large door, and prepared to jump down. He ran through the fighting warriors until he was beside the Wraith, and leaped onto it. He trusted his new armor to absorb the shock of landing, so it came as an unfortunate surprise to find his legs taking all of it.

"Perhaps it is due to its Huragok origins?" he wondered as he ran toward the panel, aware he was now in full sight. _The Huragok, so light of weight, may not require any such protection._

Reaching the panel, he activated it quickly. As the door opened, he turned around, ready to face any Jirahanae that may have appeared. However, none seemed present on the floor. On the walkways, battles were ending, and the chamber soon became silent. "What is our status?" he called up as the Wraith and Lekgolo entered, now unneeded.

"Arbiter," a Sangheili called, his shield appearing with a shimmer, "One of us has fallen, but none of the Jiralhanae have survived."

"Good," he said, thinking about their next moves, "Come down here through the corridors. Seal the doors as you pass them, and eliminate any enemy you encounter."

"Yes, Arbiter," the Sangheili answered as he and the others moved to obey. Soon, they entered the chamber, and he was hurt to see that one of his warriors had his right arm entirely ripped off. With his energy shield encasing his body, the blood which leaked from the wound covered his whole body, giving the Sangheili a quite gory appearance.

The Covenant was in disarray, making it very unlikely his sacrifice would be catalogued by the Ministry of Glory. No tapestries would be woven, his family would never receive any honor, and most importantly, there were no Forerunners to ensure an equal balance of malice and fortune.

The Arbiter now doubted very strongly in the existence of any of the after-lives of which he had known since birth, meaning that if any of them were slain, there would be no more life for their souls. _I must plan very carefully,_ he reasoned. _If any should die in vain, I will have failed._

"Arbiter, the only enemies we encountered were a few Kig-Yar," the same Sangheili that spoke before told him. "I suspect they were sent to investigate the noise created by our battle. When they cease to return, the Jiralhanae shall soon learn of our presence."

Accepting the news, he quickly gave them his orders, "We shall enter the launch bay, open its doors, and summon our brethren. Should any stand in our way, we show them no mercy. However, allowing our reinforcements entry is our top priority. Engage active camouflage."

Akiso Nonu Saba was amazed. After such ages under the oppressive rule of the creatures who dared to call themselves 'Prophets,' it seemed a group of Sangheili were finally revolting. With the fierce warriors as allies, the Lekgolojiri could very possibly overthrow the tyrannical government once and for all. "Shall we rid ourselves of these worthless fools?" he rumbled to his mate, Etowo Nonu Shichi, lightly jerking his mass head at the brainwashed Sangheili around them in the crowded Phantom.

"Do not be quick to rid ourselves of potential tools, Akiso," Etowo answered craftily. "These warriors may be enemies of our greater goal, but we are all enemies of the Jiralhanae. Let us wait for an

opportune moment to present itself before we shake lose our misguided escorts."

"Such is wise," he agreed. As their Phantom flew on, his mind filled with wonderful imagery. _Perhaps after realizing we were all deceived, the enslaved races will join together to help create a new world where we shall all be the same._ For the first time since civil war broke out, he let out the odor of happiness. _Such a wonderful dream._

However, he could tell his mate did not hold such grand thoughts. Her singulars, he smelled, were tightened with stress. He felt sadness on her behalf, but could not properly comfort her in warrior form. In an attempt to induce her sense of patriotism, he let out a soft rumble echoing the seventh verse of the Eternal Song: "Ever divided, yet awash with unity, the Lekgolojiri flows free. We are always, with both sorrow and glee, and this We always shall be."

The Arbiter opened the door to the launch bay, and hurried inside. The Jiralhanae that were inside could very well choose to fire on the apparently empty hallway, and he wished to clear the doorway before they did. However, there were only two Kig-Yar nearby, relaxing without their shields. They looked up startled, and the Arbiter quickly crushed their skulls before they could raise an alarm.

Under camouflage, his warriors silently spread out through the bay. It was nearly empty on the bottom level, there were only two Jiralhanae nearby a banshee on the far side of the bay, but there were several others on the second level. Understanding the need for stealth, two Sangheili slipped behind the two Jiralhanae.

"Understandable, brother," one of the beasts was saying. "However, you must put aside your feelings, and trust the Hierâ€|" An energy garrote struck its throat, cutting off the sentence. Its partner was similarly detained, and both soon slumped down to the floor, their necks lightly smoking.

As his warriors carefully propped the corpses against the separating wall in a simulation of life, he realized there was no energy lift in the chamber. Through what was no doubt a misuse of political power, the cruiser design had not been updated for nearly an Age. Without the efficiency the lifts would provide, their task would be extended more than should be necessary, possibly risking their lives. He made a mental note to propose to 'Lafatee they redesign the cruisers at the next available opportunity.

They quietly entered the corridor to take them to the second level, to find it contained three Kig-Yar at its far corner. One noticed the door closing, and held up its shield defensively while speaking to its partners in its harsh language. The Arbiter hurried across the hall to strike them with the _Fist of Rukt_. He was able to strike two at once while they huddled together behind their shields, but the last was far enough away to let out a screeching cry, one which echoed in his ears even after he slew its maker.

He aimed the hammer up the hall in preparation for enemy reinforcements, and activated his radio. "Phantom _Noble Message_,"

he called softly, "Prepare to deposit the second lance in the aft-port launch bay." No response came. "_Noble Message_, this is the Arbiter," he tried again.

A Jiralhanae appeared at the end of the hall. "Bloody mercenaries," it muttered before seeing the dead Kig-Yar. As it stopped walking, the Arbiter fired a blast, smashing it against the inter-deck junction column.

"Thanatos!" The Jiralhanae's partner cried out, as it rushed over to the corpse and into the Arbiter's line of fire. Unfortunately, the hammer required a slight pause to regain power, giving the Jiralhanae time to react. "Filthy rebels!" it screamed as it began to fire its crimson rifle at the same time as the Arbiter fired his hammer. The gravity blast sent it to join its partner, while a stray bolt caught the Arbiter's left arm.

Instead of the mere zap of his body shield, the red plasma burned into the armor directly. "Arg!" he let out as his active camouflage failed. Through the pain, he saw his new armor smoking as it would in direct contact with plasma. "_Excellent,_" he thought sarcastically. "_Once more, I have no shields!_"

"Arbiter, are you alright?" asked one of his still camouflaged warriors.

"I believe so," he answered. The armor seemed to have done its job even without shielding, although he found the heat painful. "My body shield has failed." "_My fault for accepting untested technology._"

"Fear not, Arbiter," the warrior said. "We shall protect you until the _Noble Message_ arrives. That is, I assume you will wish to leave the combat zone while unprotected?"

"I think not," he replied. "My orders are to seize this vessel, and thus I must accompany the unit involved." He gestured at the black column with the two corpses spread around it, "That is an inter-deck junction column, used by Huragok to pass between levels. We must secure one to repair my armor."

He barely had time to finish his order, when two Jiralhanae pairs made their way around the corner. The blurry forms of his warriors sprang in front of him to protect him from the torrent of plasma that soon erupted. He realized he could no longer fire the hammer for fear of catching his fellow Sangheili in its discharge. He could do nothing without closing the distance, and did not dare to emerge into the plasma barrage. Instead, he stepped behind the corner, out of the way and trusting his warriors to finish the battle.

"-biter, â€|locationâ€|"_ hissed his radio amidst harsh static.

Anxious, he spoke into the radio even as a fierce battle took place mere units away, "_Noble Message_, repeat your words."

"Arâ€| weâ€| pleaseâ€| notâ€| us,"_ he managed to hear through the interference.

He tried several more times to communicate, and eventually understood

that they were requesting his location. "Aft-port launch bay," he repeated several times until the Phantom appeared to understand.

A Sangheili let out a scream nearby, and the Arbiter tightly gripped the hammer, preparing to use it. Unfortunately, the plasma shot hit the active camouflage controls, leaving him visible to all enemies. He waited behind the corner then, ready for whomever that would approach him, ally or enemy. He did not have to wait very long, for a blurred section of air soon moved in front of him.

"Arbiter," the Sangheili said, "We have lost three warriors; I am the last of my unit. But fear not," he said again, "We will complete our mission."

It crushed him to think that all three lives had been spent, never to be once more again. But he nodded in affirmation, "The Noble Message is already on its way. We will receive reinforcements, secure a Huragok, and then take this ship into our possession." But he paused before continuing, "Warrior, what is your name?"

"Usbi 'Cutasee, Arbiter," he answered.

"Commander 'Cutasee, know that should you fall in battle today, I will personally ensure your name is recorded in the Ministry of Glory's tapestry," he swore, resting the hammer on the ground so he could lay a hand upon his throat.

"Many thanks, Arbiter," 'Cutasee said. "It has been an honor to serve you."

As one, they began moving up the hall to complete their missions.

"Unggoy!"

Gedeg blinked as he sprang awake. He was amazed at how refreshed he felt from his mere nap; it was as though he had not slept in a lifetime. Remembering his commander, he turned to face Major 'Bepolee, "Yes, Excellency?"

"Unggoy," the mechanic said patronizingly slow, "Watch my Huragok, and make certain it does not leave the room until it completes its duties. Understand?"

Annoyed, he was careful to keep his emotions in check to answer, "Yes, Excellency."

"Good," the Major affirmed, striding outside to leave him with the savant.

He stood alert until the door slid shut, and then moved to inspect the Huragok. It was a fascinating creature, its many tentacles spread over pieces of Lekgolo armor, reworking its structure on minute levels. He wondered what the alterations were, what could give solid armor an energy shield. He also wondered why he had never thought about that before. Just too tired, I suppose!_

He felt strongly within him that it was a sign from the Forerunners

that he should wake so clear-headed on the unit in which an Unggoy was blessed. In his youth, his mother had told him all sorts of grand stories of an Unggoy becoming a great warrior, open to the gods in a way no other Unggoy ever could be. When he had heard Jitji's words, telling him of the Arbiter's forgiveness, his mind had gone to the stories. _Not just stories,_ he knew now.

He felt the Forerunners speak to him in their silent voices, and he knew within him that the story was a prophecy. Jitji was now the Arbiter's own aide, just as the character Rajar became the aide of an Honor Guard. He remembered how Rajar then raised an army of Kig-Yar to assault the Quelni leaders, killing a great enemy of the Covenant. He was sure Jitji would soon lead an Unggoy army against the Humans, and his own alertness was good evidence.

For instance, he found it interesting that the Huragok began its work on the top of the Lekgolo armor, when it had earlier begun work from the bottom of the Arbiter's armor. _Why would it do that?_ he wondered, tilting his head. After examining it for a moment, he realized it was a different Huragok than the first. This one was a slightly darker shade of pink, and had a different pattern of spots on its gas bladders. _That explains it._

He continued to watch the Huragok work. _Shielded Lekgolo pairsâ€|_ That sounded incredibly efficient, and he wondered why none had thought to produce such armor before. _Surely not from distrust?_ While there was clear animosity between the races of Lekgolo and Sangheili, there had been no war for over an Age. _Surely the Ministry of Glory would not be so stubborn?_

He turned as he heard Major 'Bepolee enter, "Greetings, Excellency."

The Major, of course, refrained from returning a greeting, "I see you managed to follow orders this time, and without falling asleep. I suppose I have that to thank the Forerunnersâ€| This Huragok is valuable, Unggoy, for it alone knows how to convert armor. If you had let this savant free, it may have become gravely injured. If it did, I would have to punish you, Unggoy. Not all Unggoy are spared, I assure youâ€|"

Not all blessedâ€| "But what of first Huragok, Excellency?" he interrupted the Major's rant. Realizing how the Sangheili would likely react, he cursed his tongue and took a step back.

However, 'Bepolee paused for a heartbeat, before saying in a firm yet less hostile tone, "Stupid Unggoy! Certainly that is the same Huragok. Why would I trust such a precious secret to two?"

"Me no know, Excellency," he said quickly, hoping to avoid his wrath. "Me think it darker, but me stupidâ€|"

"Quite so," the Major snapped. "Leave me, Unggoy. I have no use for a servant that sees things nonexistent."

He bowed his head in shame, "Yes, Excellency." He quickly left the mechanic's room, and headed toward his pit.

It's not fair, he thought. _I was sure it was differentâ€|_ But of course, why would he trust the secret to two Huragok? _He wouldn't._

The upgrade was likely critical to their victory over the insurgents. _And the Arbiter wears it now, perhaps prompting them to search for its source._ He had a brief image of Jiralhanae invading their complex, easily defeating the few guards left behind, and shuddered.

He decided to direct his thoughts to something less troubling, and thought instead about Jitji. He could scarcely believe he had once trusted the rumors that Jitji had been possessed by the Humans' evil, but he started wondering if there really was a threat. Could the Humans take over someone's mind, and make them commit treason? If so, would the person possessed realize it? If not, did that mean that one could do evil while believing they were doing good?

He shivered. Somehow, this line of thought was scarier than the thought of a massacre. He started to focus his thoughts elsewhere, but paused. _To run from an enemy is cowardly, and may threaten the whole unit. Perhaps if I turn from this terrifying idea, I may likewise threaten everyone around the Humans._ He stopped walking in the center of the corridor, and blinked in an attempt to regain his focus.

There could be one evil who believes he is goodâ€¦ How to recognize such a person? He had no idea. He thought back to the rumor, which claimed that the Humans had exuded an evil wind, one which poisoned the minds of those around them, making them as wicked as they are. He blinked, trying to remember if he had ever heard such a story before.

A Major Sangheili strode into the corridor, and he jumped. Fearing a painful scolding, he quickly began walking once more. _Sangheili, yes, the rumor was spread by a Sangheili._ He remembered the proud Special Operations Commander speaking to everyone who would listen to him, bristling with criticism of the Arbiter's choice to keep the Humans as servants. _The Arbiterâ€¦ _

He gasped within his mask, and the Sangheili gave him a glance before continuing on his way. Gedeg, however, was too preoccupied to give the matter much thought. _The Special Operations Sangheili thought the Arbiter had been possessed! He thoughtâ€¦ _ Gedeg shook his head. This was a chance to figure it out.

_Okay, what has the Arbiter done? He brought in two Humans, insisting they be left unharmed; he spared Jitji after he had been declared a traitorâ€¦ _ He shook his head again. Jitji's statement that he had done what he did in an attempt to feed all Unggoy at the base had been basically confirmed by the last Unggoy he spoke to before beginning his act of treason, and the Arbiter was able to see his innocence. No, he strongly doubted they were evil.

He paused. _Maybe I'm looking at this wrong. If I assume the Arbiter is protecting the Humans for a good reason, perhaps binding them somehow, thenâ€¦ _ Perhaps it was the one who spread the rumor who was possessed. It made sense that the Humans, unable to touch the Arbiter, would hope to inspire insurrection.

Dizzy, he leaned against the wall. He wondered whether to report his findings to 'Bepolee, but decided against it. _I don't really know anything, I merely have theories. Besides, he got mad when I claimed to see a different Huragok, maybe this will drive him to striking

me._ He winced at the thought.

However, now that he thought about it, he did remember the Sangheili actually calm slightly when he brought it up. _Yes, I had interrupted the Major's rant, and then he paused and became calmer before responding._ He smiled a bit. _Maybe he's kinder than he first appeared!_ But his more rational side thought, _Or maybe he was merely confused._

Or maybe it was the Humans' evil powers? He chuckled at the thought. _Now I'm getting silly. Why would the Humans possess Major 'Bepolee?_ And then it came to him. The Major had given the Arbiter a new suit of armor with a new type of shielding; were he to have succumbed to the evil wind, he may have well placed a bomb within the armor. Should any question it, he could say it was simply part of the new shielding systems. And after the Arbiter dies, they would question the Huragok that put together the armor, so heâ€¦ _He got rid of the Huragok and replaced it with a darker one._

The pieces were all there, and they made sense. _Well thenâ€¦_ He was fairly amazed he had actually uncovered a conspiracy, for despite his internal debate the thought of his Commander being a traitor seemed quite alien to him. _I must report this,_ he thought finally. He slowly began walking toward the nearest shaft, hoping to find Major 'Neporee there.

"The Arbiter has called for us," the Phantom pilot informed its troops. _"Be ready to serve."_

Akiso Nonu Saba tightened his grip on his shield out of reflex. _Yes, of course, combat will soon follow._ He had nearly forgotten it, so was he caught in fantasy. Equality was a fine dream, but it was not something to be brought forth from mere discourse. No, any great change required blood to be spilled, for the Jiralhanae surely would not listen to reason.

Sensing his discomfort, his mate whispered to him a Covenant battle hymn. He appreciated the gesture, but would have preferred a Lekgolomila chant. All the same, he willed his singulars to calm as he followed the beat of the song.

However, he felt himself tense once more when the Phantom slowed to a stop. But while one Sangheili stepped over to the storage compartments, the others stood still. It seemed combat was not upon them just yet. Just then, a sudden stench assaulted his senses, and he pulled back his mass head in an attempt to rid himself of such an unpleasant odor. He felt his mate behind him stiffen.

"Mate, do you smell that caustic scent?" she asked rather bluntly, something he could understand given the most uncomfortable circumstance.

"Indeed, Etowo, I do," he replied unnecessarily. He twisted his singulars, hoping to bury the scent within him.

"Akiso, I believe these Sangheili may be greater risks than I first believed," she rumbled worriedly.

The Phantom began to move forward. _"Warriors, prepare for combat,"_ the pilot declared.

The Sangheili surged toward the gravity lift, and Etowo whispered her concerns to him. His singulars shivered involuntarily as he felt disturbed by her insights. Yes, even as he would gladly chant to the great pool, he felt an envy that his mate had understood the implications on her own. It was times like this that made him wish he were still female.

13. Rebellion

Kiga 'Oimomee eyed the female Human commander across the room with a glimmer of awe. It was a very odd thing, to have a Human present and treated as though it were a member of the Covenant. Not simply a member, but as high in class as the Sangheili themselves. An odd thing, but not necessarily a bad thing.

He looked away from the Human, as he began his routinely check of the holo-pedestal to see if they could contact the battlenet. _Not yet._ He stood up, and watched the Human once more. This was a creature from nightmares: an unholy menace that could outwit and destroy Covenant fleets and Forerunner relics. Yet now, it was loyal to them. The strange power of Humanity was on their side, but certainly not without their own wicked desires he was sureâ€|

"High Councilor?" the Human asked in its lovely alien tongue, drawing the Sangheili's attention away from his discussion with Ship Master 'Setfethee. _A beautiful creature,_ he thought. It bore the smooth, elegant features of a prize female, yet this was contrasted by her shockingly pale skin and flat simian face. _Strangely fascinatingâ€|_

"Yes, what is it, Commander?" the High Councilor responded in a poor attempt at capturing the grace of her speech.

"I wish to speak to the Monitor," she replied authoritatively. Even surrounded by Sangheili, the Human retained a sense of control. "I have some more questions for it." That she could question the holy Oracleâ€|

"Very well," the High Councilor answered with a simple nod. "You may enter my chambers." Upon hearing cherished information from the Oracle, the High Councilor had bound it to his personal chambers to prevent it from passing into the hands of the enemy.

"Thank you," she acknowledged, stepping through the doorway with all the tempered grace of an Honor Guard. Her escort, a Major Sangheili from the _Eternally Faithful_, strode swiftly behind her.

Kiga greatly wished he had been assigned that position. To be able to gaze upon a creature of such eerie beauty for subunits at time would be an incredible privilege. In factâ€| "High Councilor?" he said nervously. "Perhaps you would allow me to accompany them? Two of us would be more secure thanâ€"

"Go," High Councilor 'Lafatee interrupted dismissively.

"Many thanks, Excellency," he said eagerly, moving to join them.

Perhaps he could even convince the guard of her eleganceâ€|

Commander Miranda Keyes walked through the doorway, her guard trailing behind her. She emerged to see a small room, apparently the High Councilor's sleeping quarters, for it contained a large cot. In the center stood what appeared to be a small gravity generator, containing the Monitor in its beam; she stepped over to it.

"Oh, hello," it said, acknowledging her presence.

Is this AI sentient? she wondered. _Might it take offense if I'm not polite?_ "Hello," she said to be safe. "Tell me about the Ark."

"What would you like to know?" it queried, its center pulsing with blue light.

She paused, thinking about what to ask. "Why is it on Earth?"

"I would assume Earth is the name of the planet it rests upon?" the Monitor asked, and she nodded. "The Ark was sent by the Forerunners to find a planet with sufficient conditions to support the Reclaimers. Upon arriving at its destination, the Ark integrated itself fully into the planet's surface to provide a continuing source of food and shelter to the Reclaimers. Would you be interested in the construction history? It has quite a past."

As the AI spoke, she heard another Elite step into the room and speak to her guard in their own language. While she had led the aliens to believe she could understand none of their language, her implants provided her with an incomplete translation of their discussion. _"Marvelous beasts, these humans,"_ the newcomer said.

_ "Noâ€| humans are nothing but filth,"_ her guard said. _ "Do not let theirâ€| grip your mind, and ensnare your eyesâ€| Nothing but sin lies within them."_

While she was interested in their conversation, she continued speaking to the Monitor to keep up the faÃ§ade. "No. Thank you," she added as an afterthought. "What does the term 'Reclaimer' mean?" she asked.

_ "â€|It would be mad to even contemplateâ€|"_ the guard went on as she spoke.

The Monitor simply stared at her for several seconds. Ages longer than any dumb AI would pause. _It is sentient,_ she decided. Finally, it answered.

"â€|The term 'Reclaimer' is used to describe a host species that has been imbued with the necessary capabilities to preform as successors to the Forerunner legacy." The automation paused before hesitantly asking, "Might I be so bold as to conjecture that the Reclaimers have forgotten their origins?"

_ "â€|Within my depths, I feel a longingâ€|"_ the newcomer was saying.

"You might say that," she answered, her mind reeling as she tried to understand both conversations. _Humanity has been altered by a Forerunner ship?_ "What was it the Ark did to us?"

"Even this pale female bearsâ€|" the newcomer was saying rather approvingly.

"Why, it releases minuscule automations designed to seek out suitable hosts. The automations will then redistribute the host species' brain functions to provide efficient means to receive the generational data necessary to achieve Reclaimer status. Would you like to hear about the conversion methods?"

"Sin descendsâ€|" the guard hissed.

"No," she shook her head, trying to understand what the AI was saying while still listening to the Elites. "What is this 'generational data'?"

"The generational data contains the neural processes of the Last Pioneers, a group of seven Forerunners holding high administrative positions," the AI said cheerfully. "In order to preserve their existence, the Last Pioneers recorded their memories using an experimental method developed from studying the Flood parasite. If you are indeed without their memories, it appears their attempt has failed."

"â€|I understand, yetâ€|" the newcomer argued, seemingly in favor of the future alliance.

"What troubles you? Nothing!" the guard snapped.

Miranda paused to absorb this revelation, deciding to focus entirely on her conversation from now on. Forerunner memories implanted among humanityâ€| _But, why would I have their memories?_ She had not heard of any kind of Forerunner ship reaching Earth, leading her to suspect it had landed in ancient times. _Not even ONI could cover up something like that._ "When, approximately, did the Ark reach Earth?"

The AI hummed some ancient tune as it thought, "Well, I have managed to look over some of the data I copied from the dirty spacecraftâ€| Hm, _Pillar of Autumn_, yes. I would speculate that you would prefer the data delivered in the format of the UNSCDF military calendar?" At her acknowledgement, he went on, "I would then speculate that the Ark arrived on your planet in approximately 100,000 BCE."

"Yes, quite ancientâ€|" she thought. That was upon the dawn of humanity itself. _So whyâ€|_ "If the Ark landed so long ago, why would I have their memories? The average human lifespan is only 133 years, something you should know from the _Autumn_'s data."

"Well, I have not had time to go over the data properly," the AI objected, sounding offended. "The destruction of Installation 04 left me with only secondary power, and I have been since caught up in the relentless politics of these meddlersâ€|" It flashed its light angrily in the direction of the two Elites behind her, still arguing.

"Alright," she said hastily. "I apologize for my rudeness." She had read a transcript of a conversation between the Monitor and Cortana, in which it had reacted very negatively at Cortana's taunts and insults, and it eventually called a group of Sentinels to kill the Spartan with whom Cortana traveled. While the circumstances were quite different, Miranda could see value in not letting the Monitor becoming emotional.

"Hmm, well," the AI said, calming down. "The generational data was not intended for merely its initial host. Indeed, it was designed to transfer through genetic code to be received by all further descendants. It appears that the memories of my creators failed to transferâ€¦| Ho hum." It turned slowly to the side, and appeared to stare off into space.

"You speak of racial memory," she recalled the term from her teachings. "A crude scientific theory from the early 1800's suggesting that an animal hardwires knowledge and experiences into its offspring without need for any actual contact or communication. It has been considered erroneous since Darwinian theory was accepted by the scientific community in 1859."

"Hmm," the AI acknowledged. "Well, genetic memory may well be absent from your biology, but I do assure you it exists in the biology of the Flood. It is in fact that feature that made them so deadly to the Forerunners."

Amazing, she thought, the impact of this discovery finally settling. This certainly explained odd quotes from the transcript that seemed to imply the Monitor believed SPARTAN-117 was a Forerunner with whom it had spoken to earlier. She had once dismissed the phrases as insane ramblings of an AI near the end of its life, but now she realized it was likely just confused.

100,000 years ago, she thought while trying hard to focus as the Elites' argument grew louder. Near the dawn of humanity, that was when the Ark had landed. _It's not possibleâ€¦|_ she began to wonder with a sense of both awe and fear. _The dawn of humanityâ€¦|_ "Monitor," she began slowly, "Could it it be possible thatâ€¦| that the Ark had something to do with the rise of our species?"

"Quite possible," the AI said cheerfully, entirely unaware of the distress this news had to her. "I would estimate, based on the known factors, a 86 percent chance thatâ€¦|" the AI stopped in mid-sentence, turning to look behind her.

A slight buzz that sliced through the air, warning her of an activated energy sword. She turned around, barely in time to see the red Elite charging toward her with a glowing blade. Certain that her time had come, she thanked God for allowing her to witness as much as she had, to have heard the Monitor tell her all this wonderful informationâ€¦|

What God? she then thought hopelessly. _The Monitor just said the Forerunners' Ark was responsible for Humanity._ So instead, her thoughts went to her parents. In her mind's eye, she could see her mother and father, alive once more, reading her to sleep. She could hear her father reading Shakespeare, pointing out all the parts with her namesake. _And I had really thought we could make this alliance work,_ she thought sadly, waiting for the end.

The blue Elite jumped in front of her at the last moment, taking most of the blow. However, as the great blade sliced her protector in two, the tips of the sword cut into her chest. And as she fell to the ground screaming in pain, she could think only of the quote: _O brave new world that hast such people in it._ Her namesake had been foolish in assuming most foreign people were good-willed, but she had to believe that here there were enough to truly make a differenceâ€|

When the Human's scream pierced the air, Gerka 'Setfethee was swift to respond. He entered the High Councilor's quarters to find the assigned guard with a drawn sword, the Minor's body severed in two, and Keezz motionless on the ground with red blood pooling around her form.

"It was not my fault, Ship Master," the traitor stammered. "The pilot fool simply leaped in front of me!"

Assessing the situation, 'Setfethee drew his sword and, without a thought, swiftly severed the traitor's arms. He kicked it to the ground, and removed its hooves to prevent it from running. 'Lafatee then strode in, gaping with astonishment at the gory scene.

The once guard glared at them and ironically screamed, "Traitors!"

"What filth attacked that which was under the protection of a High Councilor?" 'Lafatee asked rhetorically.

"You have violated the sacred laws," the traitor responded. "The Forerunners shall banish your souls to the Shadow World for all time!"

Ignoring the banter, 'Setfethee examined Keezz. Thankfully, she still seemed to be breathing. He activated his local radio, "This is 'Setfethee. I require a medical team in here now!"

"The patient has been fully healed," 'Coduree translated for the Huragok. "â€|I believe that is what it said."

Unusual that the Huragok do not place greater value on people than machinery in their language, the Arbiter thought, examining the newly repaired armor. Noble 'Cutasee had sacrificed his life to help him contact _Noble Message_, although he never realized the true value of what he was giving up. The Phantom had arrived at a crucial moment, when the Arbiter had been surrounded by enemies.

The second lance, made up of thirteen Special Operations Sangheili, including Commander 'Opskitee, and a Lekgolo pair, swiftly slew the Jiralhanae that had threatened him. With their help, they had secured many corridors (with only two deaths), and had captured a Huragok as it travelled between levels. Fortunately, one of the Sangheili under 'Opskitee had some experience speaking to their kind, and had ordered it to repair his armor. "Fire one shot upon me," the Arbiter ordered. "Aim for a non-critical section." It certainly would not do to go

into battle without testing the shields.

"Yes, Excellency," 'Coduree said, raising his rifle.

Soon, a bolt of plasma leaped from the rifle to impact against a body shield one subunit away from the Arbiter's arm. He checked his shield status, and saw its current strength was far greater than his usual armor after being shot. A pink glimmer briefly spread around his body, indicating that it was recharging. "Excellent."

They were merely two corridors away from the bridge. They would seize it, kill the alpha Jiralhanae, and then lock down every entrance on the cruiser to simplify their extermination of the vermin. He reached down and grabbed the mighty hammer from where it lay beside him, and raised it into a battle position. "We advance," he ordered.

"A thought, Excellency?" 'Opskitee interrupted. Without waiting for a response, he continued, "A mere Sangheilli-Unggoy pairing is hardly the force necessary to repel a team of Jiralhanae. I propose we task several of our warriors to guarding the gravity lift, for if the Jiralhanae advance at our rear, we may soon become overwhelmed."

"You raise a valid point," he admitted. Despite his dislike for the warrior, he did speak with insight. "However, if our party suffers a major split, we may also be overwhelmed." He turned to the warrior 'Naxasee, "You will enter the launch bay and send out a signal, summoning reinforcements. When these forces arrive, instruct them to provide support to the guards as needed."

"Yes, Excellency," 'Naxasee said with a deep bow, quite eager to serve. The warrior left almost at once, lightly bowing his head as he passed his commander.

Is he eager to serve, or to evade death? he wondered suddenly. Cowardice was a sin, reserved for the lesser races alone. However, if there was only one life to be lived, was seeking to preserve it truly sinful? _But if there are no gods, does sin in fact exist?_ he countered himself.

Yes, he decided. Whether or not there was divine punishment, there were some things that would violate morality, such as theft and murder. _And yet you spared Jitji,_ a voice inside his head sneered. _The Unggoy had killed several people outside of duty, and yet you spared him._ Was it a wrong choice? Should he have upheld Council law?

"Arbiter, is something wrong?" 'Coduree asked.

"No, nothing," he replied, shaking his head. _I must focus on the task at hand._ He tightened his grip on the hammer, "We shall now advance." Officer 'Gnaulee entered a code into his handheld pad, and the door soon opened to reveal the hall adjacent to the bridge. Inside was a line of seven Kig-Yar crouched behind their shields, followed by a line of four Jiralhnae, their weapons at the ready. Unlike the Jiralhanae pair on the left, one of these pairs wore not a dress he recognized, but a sleek suit of blue armor reminiscent of a Sangheili's.

"Kill the rebâ€" the leftmost Jiralhanae began to shout before the

Arbiter fired a blast that sent it and two Kig-Yar flying across the hall, their shields extinguishing.

Its partner let out a bellow as it ran straight at the Arbiter. Several of his warriors fired their plasma salvos upon it, but they could not halt its charge. He swung the hammer at its skull, but the creature managed to partially evade the strike. The hammer crushed the beast's shoulder, but the Jiralhanae's momentum still allowed it to smash into him. Were it not for his enhanced armor, the shield would have been completely wiped out.

Fortunately, the Lekgolo pair, who had remained crouched behind their shields, acted swift and crushed the beast beneath their massive armor. He turned back to the door to see the two remaining Jiralhanae dodging fire while holding up Kig-Yar arm shields; the still-living Kig-Yar struggled futilely to free themselves from their grips.

He charged the hammer, aimed and fired, killing the Kig-Yar and causing the Kig-Yar shields to vaporize. The now vulnerable Jiralhanae dropped their crimson rifles, and unslung grenade launchers from their backs. In close quarters such as these, those weapons could slaughter his warriors. "Sangheili back!" he cried. "Lekgolo forward!"

Quickly vanishing from sight, the Arbiter moved behind the armored giants along with the other Sangheili, also in active camouflage. He whispered commands to the Lekgolo, and they crouched down low and slowly moved forward. When the Jiralhanae began their barrage, the grenades simply bounced off the Lekgolo shields to detonate against the wall, which in turn did nothing to the mighty shields. Indeed, it seemed as though the Jiralhanae had given up, for they soon ceased fire.

However, a strange sound filled the air: _whoop-whoop-whoop_, and something flew up over the Lekgolo to attach to the ceiling above them. The Arbiter inspected it; it appeared to be a club decorated with spikes, which had penetrated the ceiling's surface to become stuck. _Poor Jiralhanae fools,_ he thought with a grin. _Even their club misses._

The club exploded with a barrage of metal spikes, shooting in a conical formation directly into their group. Several of his warriors screamed as they were impaled by the spikes, and the Arbiter ran backwards even as spikes bounced harmlessly off his pink body shield. Then the attack was over and he turned to survey the damage: five of his warriors slain, several more injured. 'Opskitee let out a growl as he removed a spike from his leg, allowing his shield to regenerate. "What in the name of Prorokâ€|" the Arbiter trailed off.

"A little gift from the Prophet of Justice," a Jiralhanae called out. "His Eminence has been most generous!"

"Allow us to share!" its partner also called out.

Whoop-whoop-whoopâ€| The Arbiter readied his hammer, and when the club rose into sight he opened fire. The gravity blast struck the club, causing it to fly back the way it came to impact upon the far wall. "Hold position," he hissed to the Lekgolo. To his Sangheili

warriors he called, "Fall back!" The club let loose its barrage of spikes, not at them, but toward the Jiralhanae couple. Their screams were most satisfying to hear.

"Are they slain?" warrior 'Ipsosee asked after a moment of silence.

The two Lekgolo colonies began pulsing, and together they rumbled in one voice, "That the Jiralhanae are dead is certain. No more do their hearts beat, no more do they breath air. Their bodies now lay silent and still upon the ground."

"Well done, Arbiter," 'Iposee congratulated.

"Seal the corridor," he ordered. "Officers 'Ripulee, 'Uhcutee, salvage enemy weapons."

"Yes, Excellency," they said together, obeying at once. The two officers soon gathered arms full of weapons. Several Sangheili traded their drained rifles for the crimson Jiralhanae rifles, and some restocked their grenade belts. However, all chose to discard the weak pistols once carried by Kig-Yar.

"None of the spike weapons remain," 'Ripulee reported. "Both appear to have been once carried by a pair higher in rank than the other."

"It seems some of our fears have been justified," he said. "The High Councilor of Justice has equipped these Jiralhanae with greater weapons than those of other Prophets." This new spike grenade would require him to maintain absolute caution. He turned to regard the five corpses of his warriors, five losses of life from his own negligence. _As soon as I saw it, I should have been suspicious..._

"Why would the High Councilor give weapons to these rebels?" 'Coduree wondered.

"What is a greater question," 'Opskitee interrupted, "Is what shall be our strategy for attacking the control room?"

As the Sangheili discussed amongst themselves, the Nonu Lekgolo spoke rapidly in their subsonic whispers, inaudible to their commanders. "The Jiralhanae are not worthy of our service," Akiso said. "Not only are they brainwashed, they have never preformed M'jakaziâ€|"

"They may be more useful tools than these Sangheili," Etowo argued. "They are greedy and power hungry, something we can use to our advantage. Unlike the Sangheili, who are bound by strict codes of honor and loyalty, Jiralhanae care only about who in their packs has the most power. If we can speak to the Ship Master, perhaps we can appeal to his desire for power."

"Nonu Lekgolo, by the order of Chieftain Cronus, delegate to the Prophet of Justice, you are to stand down. If you refrain from further assisting the Sangheili rebels, you will be spared. Continue to assist these criminals, and you will be slain," the subsonic message repeated through the walls.

"The Arbiter commands the only resistance force â€" he is essential," Akiso insisted. "And the Jiralhanae still have not preformed M'jakazi. Lekgolomila revolves around the Haramia. Without Haramia, Lekgolojiri has no purposeâ€"|" "

"Do not forget Kinaya, mate," Etowo reminded him. "After the Quelni were defeated, we reverted to Kinaya. Even though the Sangheili live, we must revert lest we be swallowed whole. We understood once, and we will again! Revert, mate. Revert."

Akiso paused, thinking it over. It seemed foolish to enter a state of Kinaya in combat form, but his mate was usually right. He began the conversion process.

Ship Master Aeson surveyed the displays with a scowl. The filthy rebels had infiltrated the cruiser, and had managed to lock down several corridors using high-level security codes. However, one of the Sangheili had surrendered. It had left the secured areas by way of an inter-deck junction column, purposefully seeking them out to surrender.

He turned his gaze back onto the prisoner. The Sangheili specifically requested to speak with him, so his guards had stripped it of its clothing and removed both of its arms to make sure it was safe. It now stood weakly in the corner with an escort on each side, begging for him to merely capture its group of rebels.

"What do you think, Consus?" he asked of his bloodmate. Consus had been a faithful ally to him since they were infants, and had selflessly protected him through many a scuffle during their adolescence. When he became of age, rather than take a set of wives like himself, Consus chose instead to bind himself to Aeson through a ritual of blood to insure that they would never be separated.

"It gives us a unique opportunity," Consus answered, studying the Sangheili. He thoughtfully stroked the steel necklace marking him as a bloodmate. "Should we allow these Sangheili to live, it could convince other rebels to surrender as well. Such things could earn us high praise from the Chieftain. However, one wonders if rank matters so much with the Great Journey so near in sight. â€"|"I can certainly think of other things to do with it," he gazed at the Sangheili with eyes filled with lust.

As tasty as the Sangheili looked, it was a point to consider. According to the rebel, this group was led by the Arbiter, a very important political figure among the Sangheili. The Arbiter's death at his hands could well inspire them to fight harder than ever, but if he could have the Arbiter announce the superiority of the Jiralhanae on the battlenetâ€" _I may become responsible for the quelling of the rebellion._

"I think I shall accept this offer," he said, thoughtfully rapping a claw against his new battle armor, colored red as a Prophet's blood according to Chieftain Cronus, one of many gifts from the next Hierarch. He tilted his head to stare into one of the Sangheili's sideways facing eyes, "Tell me again, 'split-jaw,'" he quoted a popular Human insult, "Of this heresy the Arbiter commits."

"The Arbiter h-has accepted two Humans as a-allies," it began, stuttering slightly but still proud, "Heâ€ They, the Humans, they convinced him, a Ship Master, and a High Councilor, that the Great Journey is a lie, and they now intend to declare war upon the Prophets themselves!"

Behind them, his warriors began laughing derisively. "Make war with the Prophets?" said one. "Any creature that has read the Writ of Union knows well that the Prophets cannot be defeated!"

"You of all creatures should know better than to laugh," the Sangheili growled bitterly. "Were it not for the High Prophet of Regret's own defeat, you vile _Brutes_ would still be lolling in the lower districts!"

Roaring, Aeson grabbed onto the bleeding stubs that were once the prisoner's shoulders, and shook it roughly. "You should learn the value of silence!" He drew his spiker and placed the bayonets against its mandibles just lightly enough to feel its sting. "Tell me of the Arbiter's strengths and weaknesses!"

"H-he has the same body shields that Huragok possess," the prisoner mumbled, trying not to press against the blades. It failed, and purple blood dripped down his gun onto his hand. "And two Lekgolo that may follow his command over my commander's," it added. "Andâ€"

He removed the rifle from its mouth and slashed it across the chest, causing it to cry out in pain. "Yes?" he queried, letting the blood drip off the blades and onto the Sangheili's head. "What else?"

"H-he c-c-carries the F-Fist of Rukt, ah, Excellency," the trembling Sangheili got out.

All Jiralhanae on the bridge gave out a terrific snarl, and Aeson bared his teeth even though it could not be seen behind his battle helmet. Consus, however, did not have any such restriction and furiously growled, "Alpha Chieftain Tartarus has been slain!?"

"Bloody rebels!" cried Navigation Officer Neoptolemus. "Damn them all to the sea of shadow! Ship Master, end this traitor's life!"

Aeson, however, hesitated. If Tartarus was dead, then Cronus would soon become Alpha Chieftainâ€ and making it possible that he would be selected to be the next Chieftain under Justice. If he were responsible for ending the rebellion, it would be certain. _I cannot lose this chance._ "No," he said. "We will honor this agreement. If the Arbiter does indeed possess the gravity hammer, then we must fight with heavy infantry."

Understanding, Consus turned back to the Sangheili, "Tell us the names of the Lekgolo!"

14. Mercy

Kinaya â€" a state in which Lekgolo colonies can both merge into each

other as in the great pool, and can separate to degrees of which they are normally unable. Generally it is only engaged during a lack of Haramia, when the Lekgolojiri has none to serve. However, the Nonu Lekgolo now began the process even while surrounded by Haramki Sangheili, for the promotion of Lekgolomila was ultimately more important.

Akiso felt his identity begin to fade away as his mate's personality began to merge with his. He, or rather it, for gender did not exist in Kinaya, found it was able to flex its mate's singulars and likewise felt Etowo move what were once Akiso's singulars. Soon the last of Akiso's independence faded away, and the Nonu were as one.

The Nonu let loose a subsonic rumble that flowed throughout the floors and walls of _Zealous Missionary_: "The Arbiter must survive."

Barely the span of seven Sangheili heartbeats later, a short response came back: _"Agreed."_

Then, the Nonu felt the footfalls of over a dozen Jiralhanae approaching from all directions. _They must have obtained the entry codes,_ they realized. The Nonu needed to act swift to ensure that their voice would be heard by the Ship Master. _We must prove ourselves loyal to him._

As the Nonu felt the Jiralhanae begin to interface with the doors, they converted the Etowo colony from warrior form to the more unrestricted tendril form. The Sangheili turned in what the Nonu recognized as confusion when Etowo singulars abandoned their armor to morph into a strong tentacle.

"What is happening?" the Arbiter asked as the Etowo colony wrapped tightly around his body, making him drop his gravity hammer. "Release me!"

"If you are to live further, you must submit to the Jiralhanae," the Nonu responded as the doors opened and armed Jiralhanae soon surrounded them. "We request that you do so." The Sangheili became tense, yet those beside the Arbiter were unusually calm for the supposed enemies of Jiralhanae. _Brainwashed fools,_ they thought in contempt. However, the Arbiter began to draw his energy sword, and the Nonu quickly receded the Etowo tentacle before it activated.

The Jiralhanae then attempted to subdue the Haramki, firing their plasma upon him to weaken his shield. But the Arbiter just lunged into the pack and gutted a single Jiralhanae with his sword. When another Jiralhanae (the first's partner they guessed by the speed of his heart) grabbed onto the Sangheili, he spun around and sliced the legs off.

"Do not fight, Arbiter," another Sangheili called. "This is for the best."

The Arbiter did not respond, but instead leaped into the air and threw a plasma grenade into the group of Jiralhanae. One stumbled back as the heat-exuding plasma weapon attached to his body, and the Nonu quickly sent the Etowo behind the Akiso, which crouched defensively behind its shield.

After the hot plasma showered the corridor, the Jiralhanae struggled to recover as the Arbiter struck swift. It seemed the Arbiter's shields had withstood the might of the grenade, leaving him the only warrior not stunned by the explosion. With this advantage, the Arbiter slew three Jiralhanae before running down another corridor and out of the line of fire.

It appears we have underestimated the Arbiter, they realized. They began to follow with the Etowo tentacle, but were soon halted by the scorched floor. Carefully wrapping the Etowo tightly around the Akiso, they followed after the Jiralhanae chasing the Arbiter.

As he ran, the Arbiter pressed his mandibles together in fury. Had he not warned them? Had not he stated his concerns regarding 'Opskitee's loyalty? _'Setfethee knows him better,_ he mocked. _He is a fool._

Just as I was fool for trusting the Prophets, he realized with a growl. Crimson plasma rapidly splashed against the pink shield covering his back, causing it to deplete most worryingly. As he reached the end of the corridor, he paused to grab a plasma grenade and turned to hurl it at his attackers, and saw four Major Jiralhanae with the Lekgolo, once his, charging behind them.

He threw the grenade onto a center Jiralhanae, and then ducked into the next hallway. Fortunately, there were only a few Kig-Yar inside. They squawked in surprise as the Arbiter swiftly sliced them apart. _I need a planâ€|_

He engaged his active camouflage and prepared to run back toward the launch bay so that he could escape in the Banshee, but the door behind him opened as three living Jiralhanae came after him. It seemed the grenade only killed one, but had visibly damaged these three.

Unfortunately, even active camouflage was not powerful enough to conceal the mighty glow of the Sangheili sword. A Jiralhanae with half its face melted soon gave the order to fire, but before the barrage could begin, the Arbiter lunged upon it and improved its beauty by removing the scarred portion. One of the remaining Jiralhanae began to fire its red plasma on him as the other struck him with its rifle, the combined force critically depleting his shields to nothing.

Damn it! He swung his sword and cut through the arms of the one that fired, leaving it weaponless. The other grabbed onto his shoulders to prevent the shield from recharging, but he used his momentum to break out of the Jiralhanae's hold and stab it through the stomach. However, he soon felt his legs gripped strongly by the Lekgolo tentacle.

It is bizarre, he thought as he looked up into the gravity-enhanced fuel rod cannon of its mate, couched in the doorway. He knew the Lekgolo's eel-like parts assumed the collective shapes of tentacles when feeding or breeding, but he had never heard of Lekgolo tentacles during combat situations, much lessâ€| "Rebelling against an

Arbiter," he spat at the Lekgolo as Jiralhanae reinforcements began to arrive behind him, "The greatest tool of a Sangheili officialâ€¦ Am I not _worthy_ of your subservience?" Together the Lekgolo began to pulse, and he took the opportunity to strain against his captor to no avail.

"We do not take lightly the bond of Haramia," they said as one, the speech vibrating through his bones. "However, this civil war that shakes the Covenant threatens both Lekgolomila and the Lekgolojiri altogether. With delicacy is how we must act to preserve that which is most important."

"Enough talk." The Arbiter turned to look at another Jiralhanae wearing the Sangheili-like blue armor. It aimed at his head a weapon he did not recognize, a black rifle nearly a unit's length with two curved bayonets attached to the bottom. Overall, it reminded him of the Human shotgun, but for the fact that this rifle could be held in one hand. "Drop your weapon, heretic," the Jiralhanae growled.

The Prophets are false. There is no evidence of any afterlife, he whispered in his head as he went over his options. He could surrender, and continue his existence for a while. It was probable that the Jiralhanae would seek to torture him, a process that could potentially take several units, even a cycle, to complete. It was a poor existence, but better than none at all.

"Here lies the truth of the Humans' evil. For what else could drive a loyal servant into darkness?" 'Opskitee's voice echoed in his head. _Refusing to question your values,_ he answered silently. 'Opskitee was so utterly convinced that he was right that he was able to persuade an entire stalker unit to commit mutiny. _'Opskitee surrendered to the Jiralhanae. He could reveal the location of the base, and eliminate our chance of redemptionâ€¦_

"Drop your weapon now!" the Jiralhanae yelled, thrusting the bayonets close to his face. The Arbiter slowly began to lower the sword to keep from being shot, but was careful to keep his hold on it for as long as he could as he tried to decide. It was truly terrifying to think of not existing at all, to not even suffer the fate of drowning in an endless sea of darknessâ€¦ However, just as sin existed without gods, so did virtue.

The beginning of an age of truth awaited the Sangheili should he find a way to succeed, an age of reconciliation and forgiveness, where no Human would perish ever again in the name of false gods and prophets. High Councilor 'Lafatee, Ship Master 'Setfethee, Commander Keezz, Sergeant Jahnsenâ€¦ all counted on him for survival. _"With delicacy is how we must act to preserve that which is most important."_ the Lekgolo had told him.

Lekgoloâ€¦ The Lekgolo colony wrapped around him was in tentacle form in a combat situation. That reminded him of somethingâ€¦ _The Taming of the Lekgolo,_ he realized. Massive tentacles, all joined together, had assaulted the Sangheili warriors soon after they occupied the Quelni city. The Lekgolo had only one mind, he remembered from his teachings, until the Sangheili forced it to split into several individual warrior form colonies.

We fought them until they begged for mercy, pledging to forever serve us. It was an old story, but one to which he had not paid

close attention. He did remember, however, his teacher explaining that while the Lekgolo currently lived in millions of small colonies made up of 100 eels each, once every 3.4 cycles the Lekgolo merged in one of seven great pools in High Charity for breeding purposes. _Is it possible that these Lekgolo are merged?_

He bent at the waist, bowing in mock-respect to the Jiralhanae as he set the sword at its feet. Laughing, it lowered the black rifle as it knelt to retrieve the sword. He swiftly reached out and seized the wrist of the Jiralhanae's hand holding the rifle, and grabbed the rifle with his other hand, striking the beast's head with his own and forcing the rifle from its grip.

Stumbling back, it let out a bark of anger and swung its free fist at his face. The Arbiter ducked the blow and slammed the rifle's bayonets into the tentacle, cutting it from his legs. As he predicted, the Lekgolo warrior form shuddered with pain and lowered its weapons. He released the Jiralhanae and ran for the door, while he grabbed and activated a plasma grenade.

He turned to throw the explosive, when a large metal spike penetrated his leg. He could not help but cry out in pain, but refused to drop the grenade as an Unggoy would. Instead, he threw it into the heart of the collection of Jiralhanae, and then ran out the door into the next hallway.

The door automatically closed and muffled the sound of the explosion. The Arbiter took the moment offered to him to examine his wound. Burning a bright orange, the spike was over the length of half a unit. Knowing he would have to remove it to let his shield recharge, he took a deep breath to calm himself before grasping a hold of the spike.

His hands sizzled and pain streaked through his arms, making even his back ache as he swiftly pulled the spike from his leg, dropping it at once. _Bloody Jiralhanae,_ he mentally growled as his shield began to recharge. He glanced at the painful burns on the palms of his hands, but quickly activated his active camouflage as the door opened behind him.

"It can't have gone far. Find the heretic beast," a Jiralhanae Major â€" not the fancy armored warrior, the Arbiter noted with a smile â€" growled to his Minors. "Remember, aim carefully, and only use your Spikers. The Ship Master wants it breathing."

The Arbiter was elated at this news, despite the implied promise of torture. Knowing that his enemies would only attempt to disable him gave him more freedom in combat, and he also now knew the name of his new weapon. _Spikerâ€" it is an Unggoy's word,_ he thought scornfully, thinking of the Needle Pistol they had renamed the Needler. Unfortunately, many Sangheili students had learned the false name, and it had become practically official.

The Jiralhanae Minors moved forth, and the Arbiter seized his chance to leave undetected, following close behind one headed in the direction he needed. The Minor stepped through the doorway, failing to notice the warped section of light trailing behind it. He aimed the Spiker â€" _Spike Rifle,_ he corrected himself, for that was surely the correct name â€" directly at his escort's head. Even a creature as robust as a Jiralhanae could not survive a spike in its

brain.

The traitor Unggoy Jitji came into his mind unbidden. He was surely dead by now, his execution come at last, for the Jiralhanae now moved freely within their corridors. _So much for my mercy bringing me great reward._ In fact it was because of his mercy in not confronting 'Opskitee that he now snuck about in active camouflage.

The Jiralhanae paused in its steps and sniffed at the air, growling softly. It began to turn around, but the Arbiter fired. As he had imagined, the beast did not survive the experience. Fortunately, there were no other creatures in this corridor and no further alarm was raised.

He quickly scavenged the body, finding ammunition for his new weapon as well as two grenades to replenish his supply. Activating his active camouflage, he raised one of his crimson rifles to complement his Spike Rifle, and carefully opened the door to find the next corridor utterly empty.

He walked through to find the next hallway as empty as the one before it. _I suspect a trapâ€|_ However, he had little choices. _I wonder if I could contact the reinforcements from here?_ It seemed worth attempting. Activating his radio, he called out, "All dropships approach the aft-port launch bay at once! 'Opskitee is a traitor and has turned on me! All dropships to the aft-port launch bay!"

No response met his ears. _For whatever reason, I am alone,_ he thought. Such was the way of an Arbiter. _I was not always an Arbiter,_ he noted. _I once possessed a nameâ€|_ But it was useless to dwell on the past.

He had a mission. He would do everything it took to complete it by informing the reinforcements of the treachery, and should they fall, he would kill every Jiralhanae he could until his strength drained away entirely. Trap or no, he would continue to make his way toward the launch bay with all the force of a Prophet warrior of legend.

Jitji basked in the glory of his kill, Drinol's great corpse laying before him. _I have slain what a Sangheili could notâ€|_ Truly a sign of favor from the Forerunners. _Perhaps even a sign I am blessed?_ After some thought, he dismissed the silly notion once and for all.

What the Unggoy had called him was not to be taken seriously. Their reasoning was based entirely on the Arbiter never forgiving an Unggoy before, a flawed perspective. The Arbiter was but the will of the High Prophets, those who were connected to the Forerunners. The Hierarchs were the blessed ones, and it was in their blessed state that they had found forgiveness.

Nevertheless, it was the will of the gods that he had lived to slay Drinol. _A fine part to play in their elaborate plans,_ he thought with a grin. While many grand tales were told amongst Unggoy, this was probably to be the first true story featuring an Unggoy hero.

Desiring a chance to tell his story to his children, he made up his mind to retire at the next available opportunity. Surely this was more than enough to convince the Arbiter that his genes were worth passing on to a new generation. First, however, he needed to survive this mission.

His thoughts on obtaining breeding rights were interrupted by the nearby sound he distinctly recognized as a discharge from a Lekgolo's fuel rod cannon. He felt a touch of relief that the Arbiter's forces still lived, but this faded when he realized that Jiralhanae had attacked them after the area was supposedly secured earlier. _Are they on the retreat?_ he wondered. _Should I join them?_

No, he decided. _"The Unggoy Jitji shall remain here and guard our exit,"_ the Arbiter had commanded. Were they in fact retreating, he had to make sure the gravity lift was secure. He lifted the fuel rod cannon and, resting it back on his shoulder, slipped back into camouflage.

Boomâ€¦ Boomâ€¦ Boomâ€¦

Echoes of nearby explosions, the detonations of Jiralhanae rocket grenades, filled the air and made the small hairs on Jitji's skin stand up. _The Sangheili are using their own grenade launchers against them,_ he told himself. With a quick glance at Drinol's head, he stepped away from the door to allow his superiors to enter with ease.

His feet splashed in the warm green pool accumulating in the chamber, and he felt a burst of pride once more at his accomplishment. While he could never voice his opinion and expect to live, he was sure that the Forerunners must see him as a true warrior equal to even Sangheili. Why else would they allow him to slay Drinol?

As a young child, he had accompanied his instructor to a Sangheili graduation ceremony in which the academy students swore their loyalty to the Covenant before a Prophet. Just as the young Sangheili had spoken to the Prophet of Honor those cycles past, he now whispered in the complicated Sangheili tongue no Unggoy bothered to attempt, "So full of hate were our eyes, none of us could seeâ€¦"

He was reminded of the Sangheili who had been so eager to see him executed. The white Special Operations Sangheili had especially looked on him with disgust and hatred at what he had believed was an evil product of the Humans' malice. "Our wars would yield countless dead, but never victoryâ€¦"

These words reminded him of the war on the race of Humans. Countless numbers had been destroyed on either side of the conflict and with the Humans' destruction of the Sacred Ring, it looked as though their Demon was seeking vengeance. _Is it worth it?_ he wondered suddenly, but swiftly quashed the rebellious thought. Here was where a Prophet would speakâ€¦ "So let us cast arms aside, and like discard our wrath. Thou in faith, shall keep us safe whilst we find the path."

That was all he remembered of the Oath of the Covenant. Although it had no value in law, he felt his words resonate in the air as if a beacon of his ascension. He knew of no prayer made by Sangheili who had recently achieved the class of warrior, so he sought to project

his emotion into his words to give them the holiness the occasion merited, "My Godsâ€¦ I am Jitji, a warrior in your serviceâ€¦ Forever."

As if a sign from the gods, the sounds of battle soon stopped. "My Godsâ€¦" he whispered, but he held his breath as he heard several footsteps approach. He nearly yelped in fear when two Jiralhanae stepped inside, but thankfully found the will to keep quiet. Every instinct screamed at him to either run away or fire, but he remained as still as any stealth Sangheili would have done.

"Eternally damn these traitors to the Sea of Shadow!" cried one of the Jiralhanae as he took in the sight of Drinol's massive corpse.

"The Ship Master will not be pleased to learn of the death of the alpha Sharquoi," the other one muttered. "Perhaps we should wait until the Arbiter is obtained before reporting?"

"If we wait and the Arbiter is not taken alive, we will anger him yet further," the first countered. "I say it is better to report now and take our chances."

"Very well," the second agreed after a pause. "When you tell him, mention the feast we may have from its meat."

"Me? You tell him your idea yourself!"

As the Jiralhanae argued over who had to tell their superiors, Jitji tried to figure out what to do. He could try to kill these Jiralhanae while they were distracted, but should he not take out both at once he would surely die before he had a chance. He would be unable to complete his mission to guard the lift if he were slain, yet was he to allow these to live?

He made his decision and began to slowly step toward the door. From that angle, he would have better ability to strike both at once. His foot splashed in the pool of blood and he froze. Fortunately, the Jiralhanae were too preoccupied to notice.

He slowly made his way once more, careful to tread around the green puddles, until he stood with Drinol's head at his back. Thanking the Forerunners for his wonderful experience, he raised the cannon, took aim, and began to squeeze the triggerâ€¦

"All dropships approach the aft-port launch bay at once! 'Opskitee is a traitor and has turned on me! All dropships to the aft-port launch bay!"_ the Arbiter's tense voice met his ears, causing him to loosen his grip on the trigger in surprise. _A Sangheili has turned on the Arbiter?_ he thought in horror. How could something like that ever occur? Did he not trust the voice of the High Prophets?

This changed everything. He could not sacrifice himself now with the Arbiter in danger. If the Arbiter had no loyal warriors besides Jitji, then it was his duty to protect him. Had he not waited another heartbeat, he never would have heard the message in time.

My Gods have given me a mission, he realized with excitement. _They have accepted me! I am a warrior in their eyes!_ He walked down the ramp, avoiding the stream of blood, to leave the lift and find his

master.

The room outside contained a collection of destroyed vehicles, the messy corpse of a Lekgolo, and several Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar. Jitji swallowed, realizing the sheer force he would have to take on alone. It was one thing to slay a blindedâ€| Sharquoi, the Jiralhanae had called itâ€| and quite another to mount an attack on an entire ship filled with enemies. _The Arbiter is alone too,_ he told himself. _He needs my service._

However, it was clear that the Arbiter was not in this room. He needed to leave to search, but could not open a door without alerting the Jiralhanae of his presence. Despite the urgency of the Arbiter's situation, he would need to wait for someone to open a door for him. Pressing himself against a wall, he prepared to wait for an opportunity to present itself.

Fools, Dak laughed inwardly as he looked around him. _I am surrounded by utter fools!_ It was obvious that an Unggoy under active camouflage had just entered the cargo hold. Green Unggoy tracks had appeared from nowhere, and directly above them the air was bent. However, the idiots around him remained oblivious to it.

He considered slaying it where it stood, but if he did its meat would be accessible by only the next to eat after its preparation and Dak wanted it for himself. He had a deep love for the meat of Unggoy, second only to his love of money, and was determined to have his own personal feast.

"I need to crap," he crudely remarked as he began to make his way by the Unggoy and toward a door. As he had suspected, the Unggoy followed close behind him. After turning the corner to make sure the corridor was completely empty, he activated the console at the inter-deck junction point.

Gambling, Dak had acquired several codes to take advantage of Covenant security systems. As any use of them would make the Covenant replace the codes and dock his pay considerably, he had waited for the right moment to act. Here, now, with the Covenant civil war waging was the perfect chance to steal himself a delicious dinner and possibly evade detection from the Ministry of Tranquility. Using the codes, he sealed all entrances, locking the Unggoy in with him.

He spun around and fired a shot from his pistol, striking the Unggoy and making its camouflage fade. It was white, carrying a fuel rod cannon, and had green liquid splashed on its legs. Before it had time to do more than yelp, he lunged forward and struck it on the forehead with side of his pistol causing to fall backward.

Before it could recover, he knocked the weapon from its grasp and kicked it away. He pinned the Unggoy down and enjoyed its futile struggles. "I'm gonna eat you, gas-sucker," he told it with a grin. "I'm gonna rip the flesh from your bones and devour it right here. Maybe if you beg me, I'll let you die before I start. What do you say, gas-sucker? Want my mercy?"

He was unsure what he expected the Unggoy to say. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't "I am a warrior in service of the Forerunners, and I

do not beg for mercy!" This it said, and following this bizarre statement, it slammed its arm spikes into his arms causing him to lose his grip.

"Zxalgh!" he cried. "Covenant vermin!" Purple blood leaked from his arms, and pain ran through them. The Unggoy made a dive for its cannon, but he engaged his shield and slammed it into the pest while screaming, "You will be lucky to die!"

"My fellows feasted on the flesh of your fallen," the Unggoy grunted, its voice muffled through the golden shield. "Their weakness became our strength."

What is it doing using the Sangheili dialect? "Do you think you're Sangheili?" he laughed, pressing his weight onto the shield to crush the fool. The ache from his arms fueled his rage. "Let's test that." He disengaged the shield and grabbed onto the gas-sucker's face, pushing its mask up and off its head.

He stood up and laughed as it gasped for breath. "No, you're a worthless Unggoy just like the rest of your kind." He sharply kicked its arm when it reached for the mask, and then kicked it again for fun. "I'm gonna smash that mask."

He walked down the hall to pick up the fallen cannon, thinking about how it would despair to see its own weapon used as his tool. Suddenly, a hot ball of blue flames struck the back of his neck. He had turned his back on it! Even though it was injured, he should have been cautious. _Who is the fool?_ Dak thought bitterly. _It is none butâ€"_

BAM!

Fumbling with hands he could barely feel, Jitji pulled the mask back on his face. Finally able to breathe once more, he lay unmoving while his body recovered. Now the true impossibility of his mission sunk in. _How can I face a ship full of Jiralhanae when I can barely kill one Kig-Yar?_

When his vision was fully restored and his heartbeat returned to its normal pace, he seriously gave thought to the issue. _The strength of Unggoy is in our numbers,_ he thought. A single Unggoy, whether or not it was 'blessed,' could not win against such forces. He would need alliesâ€|

He had seen no other Unggoy here, and he strongly doubted that Kig-Yar would join him. He laughed weakly as he imagined trying to convince his attacker to fight with him, but started coughing. He turned his head to regard the scorch marks and miscellaneous pieces that were all that remained of the hostile Kig-Yar.

It had been loyal to its masters, the Jiralhanae rebels, and would certainly not have helped him. However, perhaps there were some Kig-Yar here that were loyal to the Covenant and who would join him. _Where could I find such Kig-Yar?_ he wondered.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden pounding on the door nearest the corpse. _They're trying to get in!_ He ran to his fuel

rod cannon, picked it up and engaged his active camouflage. He then hurried behind the junction column to use as cover should he decide to fire.

On a sudden impulse, he set the heavy cannon down and ran over to the corpse. He searched for the Kig-Yar's right arm and was relieved to find it intact. He removed the shield from the arm and fastened it around his own. He tested the shield to find that it was still functional, the golden shield soon fading from view.

Good. It was of little use to him if it did not accept his armor's active camouflage. He deactivated it and ran back behind the column. He was not a heartbeat late, for the door soon opened, spilling in several Jiralhanae with raised grenade launchers. Jitji raised his own cannon, hoping he wouldn't have to fight them.

"What happened here?" a Jiralhanae growled, walking toward him; Jitji kept very still.

"This blast was made by plasma grenade," another exclaimed, examining the scorch marks.

"Another one is onboard," said the only Jiralhanae among them that wore a helmet. Jitji speculated this meant he was their leader. "It may still be in this room. Keep your eyes alert for movement."

Jitji held his breath as the Jiralhanae searched the corridor extensively. Fortunately, they seemed to be looking for a Sangheili, which meant that their gazes were a unit above him. Eventually, they decided that he had moved on, and ended their search.

"Another Sangheili is onboard," the helmeted Jiralhanae reported on his radio. "It has slain a Kig-Yar and is to be considered hostileâ€| Very good," he added in response to something Jitji could not hear. "â€|Yes, Excellency, I will." He then addressed his Jiralhanae, "The Arbiter has been captured, and the Ship Master would _prefer_ to receive no bad news. The Sangheili defectors have been placed in the holding pens, and we will hunt down the last of their unit before it can cause any more damage. Jiralhanae, we move!"

And with that, the great warriors filed out of the corridor. Jitji could finally relax, yet his muscles remained as tense as ever. _The Arbiter has been capturedâ€| and I must come to his aid!_ It was now certain that the Forerunners had chosen him for this great task, and he would sooner dive into a pit of Flood than fail it.

"The Sangheili defectors have been placed in the holding pens," the Jiralhanae had said. _That is where I must go,_ he thought. _Where Kig-Yar who have openly disagreed with the rebellion were surely placed._ And with what he hoped was the grace of a Sangheili warrior, he set out to reach it.

Eito sighed with annoyance as he, along with the rest of his unit, was led to one of the ship's brigs. It was hardly necessary, for it was he who had suggested that the Jiralhanae relieve the Arbiter of his command. No Sangheili warrior would damage their honor by attempting to launch an attack by deceiving the enemy into believing that they are defecting.

Whoever had slain the Kig-Yar was from the Arbiter's first unit here, and clearly not acting under Eito's command. Yet still the alpha Jiralhanae refused to be swayed, and so he now had to wait out the war in some cell. _It is better than obeying the command of a lunatic,_ he supposed, following a Jiralhanae Major into the brig.

"You may leave," the Major snapped to his two Minors. As they departed, the Major tapped a control to lower the walls of a bank of cells; inside his lay a badly bleeding Human. "Enter."

"What is this?" Eito asked, glaring at the Human.

"A toy," the Major said dismissively. "Use it for nourishment if you wish. Enter."

Eito stepped into the cell, staring down at the creature. It was beasts like this that had polluted the Arbiter's mind, making him believe things that were obviously impossible to any rational mind. It stared defiantly up at him, even as its arms appeared useless for defense as it seemed the Jiralhanae had shattered the bones within him.

It was of a pale variety, similar to the Human commander that had corrupted the Arbiter. This one, however, appeared to be male as it lacked the milk glands present on the chests of female Humans. Its sickening red blood flowed rapidly from its crushed nose to stain what remained of its garment. "Disgusting," Eito muttered, sharply kicking it in the head and puncturing its skull.

"Your decision," the Major said mockingly, tapping another control.

Instead of the cell's wall engaging, Eito found his legs rooted to the floor as energy restraints surrounded him and removed his shield. Two shackles spread his arms far from his sides, leaving him defenseless as the filthy Jiralhanae approached him with a laugh. "What is the meaning of this?" he growled.

"Prisoners are mine to do with as I please," it answered, ripping off his chest armor to expose his skin. It drew what Eito recognized as a Human combat knife and lightly traced it across his muscles.

"I am not a simple prisoner!" he cried with outrage. "I made a pact with your master! I delivered to him the Arbiter!"

"I'm sure he is pleased," it laughed, pressing the blade into his flesh hard enough to draw blood. "I was told nothing about leaving you be, however. I wonder how you taste?" It sliced off a strip of flesh from his chest and tossed it into its disgusting maw; Eito refused to make a sound.

Treacherous animals! Eito raged. He had abandoned an insane captor for another, one which would certainly destroy him without pause. _The Arbiter may be bound to madness, but it is not one of malice._ He glanced down at the device attached to his hip: a contingency plan, now useless to him.

"Not bad," it muttered. "I prefer Human, but I certainly wouldn't

deny myself your flesh if I had no choice." It grabbed the dead Human and tore off chunks of flesh with its teeth, devouring the corpse. _Sickening that it would take pleasure from an abomination_ Out of sight, he heard the door open. "Leave us," it called between mouthfuls, and he heard the door close.

"You should have eaten," the Jiralhanae said as it threw away the bones. "You could have used the energy." It began removing the rest of his armor.

"It is better to starve than to feast on the flesh of a Human," he spat. "You have consumed something unholy and wicked, and you will no doubt take on such attributes if you are not cleansed by a Prophet."

"Humans are no more unholy than you or me," it laughed, slapping him across the face in mirth. "They are merely obstacles to be overcome if we are to alone take our Great Journey."

"Is that so?" He laughed as well, but at the notion that a Jiralhanae could be wiser in the ways of the gods than the Hierarchs. "You claim to know what the High Prophet of Truth does not?"

The Jiralhanae punched him in his chest wound, causing him to let out a yelp despite his efforts. It bent down to examine his leg wound, "It is true that this incarnation of the High Prophet of Truth has called out for the destruction of the Humans, citing damnation from the gods. But the 115th incarnation stated that all races may take the Journey, but it is only the Covenant that offers the salvation of alliance with the Prophets."

An earlier incarnation? But it was truly the same person, the same Prophet inhabiting separate bodies. He broke out of his thoughts as his captor seized the last resort weapon from his leg and held it aloft for it to gaze upon. "That is a simple nourishment container," he explained, hoping the Jiralhanae would not open it.

"For Unggoy," it added, removing the cap to examine the contents. It wrinkled its nose at the stench that erupted from it, and Eito likewise retracted his mandibles to block the taste. "I care not for the Milk they drink," it muttered, hastily replacing the cap. It turned its gaze back upon himself. "I heard no reports of Unggoy in your attack."

The traitor Unggoy must have evaded capture, he realized. _It hides like a coward in active camouflage, not even daring to fight._ "There was one," he explained. "The Arbiter spared a treacherous Unggoy so that it could die with honor it did not deserve. It was told to guard the lift, but it has evidently fled in cowardice."

"One Unggoy," it repeated, its disbelief apparent. "You hold a large feeding tube for one Unggoy?" It sliced the knife across his left arm, from the start of his shoulder down to his wrist. "Tell the truth!" it roared. "How many Unggoy did you bring?" It flung the tube across the room to impact upon the far wall, inside one of the holding cells.

"I tell you the truth," he said, utterly confused by this event. _Why would the Jiralhanae care so strongly about Unggoy?_ "The 123rd incarnation of the Prophet of Truth calls upon new information that

his earlier incarnation did not have with him," he said in an attempt to distract his captor.

"Why would the information be new?" it asked, grudgingly returning to their previous conversation. "The Forerunners ascended many eons past. The information they gave the First Prophet was all sorted out by his 57th incarnation when he declared that the Luminous Key could tell him no more, that we must search only for clues regarding the location of the Sacred Rings. That the 123rd places such great value upon the elimination of the Humans is merely evidence of the Prophet's views." It paused, aware that what it said bordered on heresy. "Now... Unggoy. How many?"

"The 123rd" Eito began, only to be interrupted by a sharp kick to his injured leg. Caught by surprise, he was unable to resist groaning from the pain.

"Answer the question!" The Jiralhanae seized his right arm and twisted, snapping the bone. "How! Many!"

"There is only one," he answered truthfully. "A traitor."

The Jiralhanae growled in frustration. "And I was so looking forward to our time together" But if you will not share secrets, you must be given a proper interrogator" It stepped back out of the cell, placing a hand on his ear piece, "This is Quirinus," he began, "I" Its message was never finished, for from the air several units away sprang a glowing fuel rod. It struck the Jiralhanae, causing it to vanish in a green cloud.

The Unggoy! he realized. _It was here, waiting under its cloak._ Soon the air shimmered, and then the traitor was revealed. It looked sick, as though it had never before seen death, and had a strange green liquid staining its legs. His eyes widened as he realized it was wearing a Kig-Yar's arm shield. _What has it been doing?_

"Opskitee?" it squeaked at him.

"Yes," he told the creature. "Release me."

The Unggoy did not move. Slowly, it aimed its weapon at him. "The Arbiter says you are a traitor," it grunted in the formal tongue used by his kind, but never by Unggoy.

"The Arbiter" _is mad,_ he wanted to say. However, what service had he done by surrendering to the Jiralhanae? _Nothing but granting torture to my warriors, and to the Arbiter._ Truly it was worse than serving under the command of the Arbiter, a mere puppet of the Humans. The Arbiter had kept his sense of honor, but the hedonistic Jiralhanae had none to lose.

"I was wrong," he admitted, to the Unggoy and the gods. "I believed the Jiralhanae could protect us from the Humans' deceit, but they are worse than any Sangheili could be. You may release me, Unggoy, for I will do no more harm."

"How me" How do I know you are telling truth?" it asked, fumbling with the grammar.

Never had he thought he would have to convince an Unggoy of his loyalty, but he now had to do so. _At the mercy of an Unggoy!_ "I give you my word as a servant of the Prophets," he promised.

The Unggoy slowly set down its cannon. But instead of releasing him from his shackles, it approached the far cell. "What is this for?" it asked him as it picked up the discarded feeding tube.

"Drop that," he snapped. "Leave it be!" He watched in horror as it removed the cap and poured a thin brown liquid from the tube onto the floor of the cell. "Do not drink it!"

"This is not Milk!" it exclaimed. It ran back to its weapon and aimed it back at him. "What is it?"

"It is a contingency plan, should the Jiralhanae not accept my surrender with grace," he said truthfully, and then lied. "It was to poison the Jiralhanae, who will consume most anything. You can see the filthy remains of a Human corpse that was eaten by my captor there." He swung his head to indicate the bloody corpse beside him.

The Unggoy nodded its head in acceptance and finally moved to the control panel to release him and his brothers. As soon as he was freed, Eito fell on his knees unable to stand. The Unggoy watched him with calculating eyes. "Can you fight?" it asked him.

"Iâ€|" he trailed off as he struggled to stand. "Do not believe I am capable," he finished with a sigh.

"Excellency?" A familiar Sangheili stepped into view. "Worry not, Excellency. I will lead us to battle. That is, if you so desireâ€|"

"Indeed," he allowed. "Yes, lead my troops to battle. Rescue the Arbiter and then beg for mercy. Iâ€|" will remain here to gather my strength."

"Yes, Excellency," the Sangheili said obediently. "Should Iâ€|" close you in?"

"No," he said at once. "Leave me an exit. But should the Jiralhanae come, I will try to deceive themâ€|" So, the poisonâ€|" he stared across the room at the spilled liquid, the promise of death.

"Of course, Excellency," the Sangheili said as he realized what had happened. He tapped a control, and a wall appeared to seal the far cell. "Yes, it would not do to have the Jiralhanae realize your plot."

"Indeed," he agreed. _It would not do to have the Flood run rampant in the ship._ "Now go."

Consus smiled up at his bloodmate, at the ship's controls. For over 14 cycles, Aeson had fought his way through the Covenant ranks, and now it appeared that he may soon achieve the greatest rank possible. Assuming, of course, that they could persuade the Arbiter to comply.

The Sangheili bastard had fought like a mad _dobgat_, but they had finally been able to capture him with the Fist of Rukt. The weapon of the Alpha Chieftain was now Aeson's, and when he presented it to Cronusâ€¦ He grinned in excitement at the thought. _Chieftain Aeson, I like it!_

However, despite the efforts of the best torturers they had onboard: two Kig-Yar named Jep and Goph, they remained unable to convince the Arbiter to obey. He wondered if they should try talking to him again, to persuade him with logic rather than pain. The Sangheili did seem to enjoy arguing more than condemning, that was evident when the Lekgolo made their case.

He shook his head as he remembered. _Now that was one bizarre eventâ€¦_ The Lekgolo had merged together into one swarm, which moved about like a massive serpent, and had declared the Prophets greedy fools who were planning to break the Covenant and walk alone. They claimed that if Aeson was careful, he could, in essence, take over the Covenant and enslave the Prophets. _"They are only as powerful as are their servants,"_ it had said. _"Steal them away, and there is nothing but lies."_

Poor foolsâ€¦ he shook his head in pity. He had studied the Writ of Union with rapt attention, more than most Jiralhanae, and was able to quote, word for word, the verse describing the inherent immortality of the Prophet of Truth:

_Prorok took the steel chalice and drained the blood from his head,

> "He who drinks of this wine shall live on in my stead."
 And
Prorok poured his mortal essence upon the Luminous Key,
> "Every Prophet who seeks the truth will find immortality!"

It was as simple as that. Consus sighed a small prayer for the Lekgolo creature, clearly mentally ill. It had been moved to a holding cell until they could find a healer who understood Lekgolo, and it would likely remain there until they returned to High Charity.

Well, if the Lekgolo cannot be hereâ€¦ "Aeson?" he called, stepping up the ramp. "Bloodmate, I believe we may get more response from the Arbiter if we approach him with logic. What do you think?"

"While the thought of listening to it scream excites me, I do see your point," his bloodmate agreed with a scowl. "It has not let out any noise but insults since the Kig-Yar began. I suppose after it was tortured by the High Council, this all seems rather _silly_ to itâ€¦"

Not wishing his bloodmate's bad mood to continue, Consus bowed his head respectfully and leaped down to the Arbiter. Swatting away the Kig-Yar, he removed the pain sticks and nodded to acknowledge the Arbiter. "Tell me," he said, hoping his voice sounded friendly, "Why are you opposed to making the transmission?"

Out of breath, the Arbiter eyed him for a moment, before finally asking, "How can you transmit through the static?"

"The static?" he blinked. Why wouldn't he be able to transmit? "What

static are you referring to?"

"Ah, High Charity has been broadcasting a communications barrier for the past unit or so," Officer Theodotus cut in, before hastily adding, "Ah, Excellency."

"Well?" he asked. Now that Theodotus had spoken, he needed to supply all information required. "How can we transmit?"

"It, the barrier, it's like, it functions similar to a series of waves," the officer nervously explained. "At times its presence is strong, but it will retract for small periods of time, allowing us to communicate."

"There, you see," he told the Arbiter in a carefully calm voice. "It's all perfectly reasonable."

"Also," Theodotus cut in again, "The waves are steadily getting weaker over time. Eventually, they will not be there at all."

"Thank you, Officer," he said annoyed. _What does he want? Fame? To have spoken indirectly to the Arbiter before his impending death?_ "That _will_ be all."

The Arbiter bowed his head in thought. "What is it?" Consus asked. "What are you thinking?" The Arbiter refused to answer. "Well, think about how many of your kind are being slaughtered by mine while you lay here refusing to act. With one transmission, you could end this useless fight, end the suffering of many. Why do you refuse to act?"

"Why do you refuse to question your belief in the Prophets?" the Arbiter retorted.

"Back to that silly thing are you?" he laughed. "You truly believe the Prophets are false?" At the Arbiter's nod, he laughed again at the ridiculousness of it all. "Alright, I'll make you a deal. If you can convince me of your beliefs, I'll do my best to convince my bloodmate to let you go, but if your arguments fail, you make the broadcast. Agreed?"

"Agreed," the Arbiter said after a pause. "The Holy Oracle of the first Halo we encountered said that the Halos were weapons of last resort used by the Forerunners to kill every creature capable of supporting the Parasite, including themselves."

"Tell me everything this Oracle said, and of the circumstances it spoke," Consus commanded. After listening to the Arbiter's story, he thought it over and suggested, "Perhaps these heretics altered the Oracle, defiled it to spout their drivel. How do you know it was pure?"

"How do you know it was not?" the Arbiter countered. "What would possess a Sangheili to alter a Holy Oracle in the shadow of the broken Halo? Could he even accomplish such a thing? To what end?"

"To walk the path alone," he said at once. "By destroying the Covenant from within. â€|Without proper examination, I could not tell if the Oracle could have been altered by him."

"I shall not give you the Oracle," the Arbiter said. "It was not only the heretics who repeated its words. The Parasite leader, deep beneath the Library, spoke the same message though it had never spoken with the Oracle or the heretics."

"The Parasiteâ€¦ _leader_?" he queried, his voice vibrating with disgust. "Those _things_ have a leader? â€¦What did it say?"

The Arbiter explained his strange experience. "â€¦And then, speaking the words, 'Fate had us meet as foes, but this ring will make us brothers,' it transported me outside the Halo's control room."

Consus was suddenly aware of his bloodmate's presence behind him. So engrossed was he in the Arbiter's story that he did not hear his approach. "The Parasite was also present on the first Halo," he pointed out. "A force of evil as great as that could have been what influenced the heretics in the first place, and convinced them to alter the Holy Oracle with their superior knowledge of Forerunner technology." He smiled at his logic.

"Why did the Parasite spare myself and the Demon if not to disarm a grand weapon?" the Arbiter asked. "When has it ever spared anyone?"

"It has not," Aeson answered from behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder. "This Parasite you encountered sounds quite unique. Tell me everything about it."

"Aeson?" he asked. "I was making progressâ€¦"

"The transmission can wait," he replied. "I want to know about this leader of the Flood."

"Ship Master!" Commander Nerva exclaimed suddenly. "The Sangheili have escaped! There have been deaths."

"Bloody traitors," Aeson growled. "You can never trust traitors," he told Consus as an aside, before yelling, "Find them and slay them!"

"Yes, Excellency," Nerva replied, returning to his radio.

"Now," he said, turning to face the Arbiter, "Tell me of the Flood leader."

"What assurance have I that you will not kill me once have I make your transmission?" he asked instead.

"I give you my word," Aeson smiled, surely thinking of his upcoming promotion.

"The word of a Jiralhanae?" the Arbiter laughed. "It's worthless."

Aeson's smile vanished, in its place a scowl. "Tell me of the Flood!" he growled.

"Aeson? Brotherâ€¦" Consus tried to calm him down.

"I will tell you of everything you wish to know," the Sangheili promised, "But only after I make the transmission."

"You will make the transmission?" Aeson said with pleasure. "Very good to hear."

"Only if I fail to convince your bloodmate of my beliefs," the Arbiter stated. "These are my demands."

Aeson opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He opened it again, and stopped. "Very well," he said finally. "Talk some sense into it," he muttered to Consus.

"Yes, Aeson," he responded, trying to remember their conversation. "What were we saying?"

"The Flood leader spared myself and the Demon," the Arbiter said. "Why would it do so if not to send us to stop the activation of a massive weapon?"

"It is hard to read the minds of creatures so alien to ourselves," he began. "But it is clear that the Forerunners wished for them to remain imprisonedâ€|" he paused to allow the Arbiter to challenge that claim â€" he did not, and Consus went on, "All evidence suggests that they are enemies of the Forerunnersâ€| and would certainly be against their Great Journey. So this claim that the Prophets are false can be shown to simply be the product of enemies of the Forerunners." He smiled. There, it has been proved false.

"The Writ of Union is wrought with errors," the Sangheili went on. "It claims that High Prophets cannot be slain, and yet see what has become of the Prophet of Regret. It claims that the gods see all and hear all, yet Prorok must call out to them. It claims that all of his race are to be deemed Prophets, yet only he can establish contact with the gods."

He continued smiling. I have him on the run. "You are taking these quotes out of context, which would certainly cause error. Allow me to explain: The High Prophets are immortal because their minds survive. Prorok crafted the Luminous Key to carryâ€|"

"Excellencies," Nerva interrupted. "Forgive me, but the rebels seem to be very near to the control room. It would be wise to prepare for battle."

"How did you let them get so close?" Aeson demanded. "Never mind. This should be short." He hefted the Fist of Rukt.

"The Key contains the essences of every Prophet of Truth," Consus continued, only to be stopped by one of Aeson's looks. He picked up a grenade launcher that had been left resting against the wall, and hurried back up the ramp.

A tense period of waiting followed. Consus gritted his teeth and kept his fingers on the trigger, ready to squeeze at the first sign of movement. And then a door opened, and he fired along with several others. Aeson, however, continued waiting.

Each grenade exploded, yet no corpses fell. The door remained open,

yet no one was visible. He fired again to no effect. Hastily reloading, he strained his eyes for movement.

Then, the flares of plasma grenades soared through the air from the entrance. As everyone near the opening ran, he fired three grenades in the direction of the grenade throwers. The doors closed before the last exploded, shielding the rebels.

"They will be back," Aeson stated. "Consus, be ready to blind them."

Understanding, Consus grabbed the long white grenade attached to his belt. A concave stick with dome-shaped caps at each end, this grenade had been given to his bloodmate as a gift from Chieftain Cronus, and Consus had been itching for a chance to try it out.

Two beeps behind him signalled that the rebels were coming in on the other side. He hurled the grenade in their direction, and then shut his eyes tightly as a blinding flash erupted. He opened his eyes in time to see a large glowing green ball speeding toward him. He ducked into a roll and fell off the ramp into the grooves running alongside it, the sounds of battle ever present around him.

Maybe I'll just wait here for a bit, he thought. It wasn't as though he needed the honor, for being the bloodmate of a Ship Master promised a healthy career. _I will soon be the bloodmate of a Chieftain,_ he thought with delight. _And my brothers thought I was foolish to make this choice!_

Hearing the discharge of the gravity hammer, he couldn't help but sneak a look of his fierce warrior. Creeping along the small ramp, he raised his head above the wall to see his bloodmate fighting for his life amongst several Sangheili. They knew better than to attack from long range, and were swiping at Aeson with the bayonets of grenade launchers.

Consus raised his grenade launcher, but thought better of it. _With a weapon like this, I cannot control who I hit._ He looked back at Aeson. Though he swung the hammer with all the fury of a Chieftain, the Sangheili danced around him to strike at his back.

Before his eyes, his brother, his bloodmate, was slain by three Sangheili. As he fell, the Sangheili moved away to engage other Jiralhanae, and Consus seized the chance to rush to the side of his bloodmate. "Aeson?" he whispered. No response.

"May your soul live on," he breathed. Then he clutched the Ship Master's corpse and wept.

As soon as the shackles restraining him vanished, the Arbiter leaped for a discarded weapon: a crimson rifle. Wielding the rifle, he sprayed red plasma across the nearest Jiralhanae as it fought a Sangheili hand to hand. He released the trigger before it could overheat, and smashed it into the Jiralhanae's skull, dropping it where it stood.

The Sangheili gave him a nod of acknowledgement, and then was blown into the wall by a gravity disturbance, crumpling into a heap. The

alpha Jiralhanae, clad in its ornate armor as red as a Human's blood, held the Fist of Rukt in its hands. The Arbiter, aware of how exposed he was, leaped behind a storage crate before it could fire.

A Jiralhanae, the one that had supplied the information regarding the communications barrier, followed him around the crate. Roaring, it charged him. The Arbiter jumped over it and onto the crate, caught the sight of three Sangheili engaging the alpha, and then leaped down to the Sangheili's corpse.

An eye on the Jiralhanae after him, he reached for the hilt attached to the hip of the dead warrior. He activated the energy sword and lunged into the beast, slicing it in two. _Truly this is the weapon for a Sangheili,_ he thought with satisfaction as the bluish blood splattered his naked body.

The sound of grenade blasts alerted him to a fight between the three remaining Sangheili stalkers and the two remaining Jiralhanae. Using their grenade launchers to great advantage, the Sangheili were dominating the battle. The Arbiter turned to gaze upon the alpha's corpse with delight, only to see the alpha's bloodmate weeping beside it.

The Arbiter deactivated the sword and dropped it, grabbing a carbine from the storage crate. _Its death is its own fault,_ he supposed as he took aim. _It is suicidal to develop such an emotional bond._ A Sangheili would pity his fallen, but never take it to the lengths that a hedonistic Jiralhanae would.

However, this Jiralhanae had impressed him with his pious devotion to religion. While it was horribly deluded, its logical viewpoints had been refreshing after hearing so many empty denials from its brothers. It had expressed an almost Sangheili-level of intellect as it argued, and the Arbiter felt a bit of reluctance to pull the trigger.

A startling revelation came to him then, _If death is truly the end with no afterlives, then perhaps hedonism is less foolish than I originally believed?_ He thought back to the delight of the Jiralhanae at his torture, and shook his head. _No. Whether or not I may be punished or rewarded, be it from a Prophet or a god, some things are just dishonorable._

â€|Such as killing a defenseless creature, he finished with a sigh. He lowered the carbine to see the last fighting Jiralhanae be slain by the Sangheili. "Halt," he commanded as they turned toward the bloodmate. "Seal the entrances." He stepped over to it.

"Arbiter," it acknowledged as he approached. "Even though you may kill me, my soul will ascend with the Covenant when the path is clear. You, however, will remain here, unable to ascend past the realm between worlds."

"Consus, is it?" he asked, ignoring the nonsensical condemnation. "I offer to you mercy. Surrender and you shall live on in this life, kept in far greater condition than any of your bloodmate's prisoners I am certain."

The Jiralhanae shook its head. "When I swore my oath, I made a covenant greater than any you could understand." It grabbed a grenade

launcher from the ground and stood up to press the weapon's bayonet to its stomach, declaring, "I do not wish to live in a world without Aeson!" It then let itself fall.

The Arbiter slammed his hands on the Jiralhanae's shoulders, pushing it up before the blade could be driven inside. "Do not be a fool," he hissed. But how could he convince someone who believed in another life?

"Kill me or release me," Consus spat. "You claim honor above my own. Let me have my dignity!" He struggled to be freed.

The Arbiter released his grip, and then punched him sharply in the head. The Jiralhanae fell to the floor motionless, and the Arbiter placed his hand on his neck. _Good, still alive._ "Restrain him," he ordered, moving to a Sangheili corpse.

Stripping the clothing from the body, he donned the thin black layer used to support armor. He then moved to the crate in which the parts of his pink suit had been placed, and carefully rebuilt his garment.

"Arbiter, on the behalf of Commander 'Opskitee," began one of the Sangheili, "I wish to apologize for the actionsâ€|"

"Stop," he interrupted. "You did not merely betray myself, but you have betrayed High Councilor 'Lafatee. When you plead for your lives, you may speak to him."

"Yes, Excellency," the Sangheili stammered nervously.

"Ship Master Aeson!" cried a familiar voice. "I demand an audience!"

He turned with surprise to see, floating a unit above the ship's controls, a lifesize holographic image of a Hierarch. Despite everything he had learned, instinct took hold and he bowed low. Realizing that he could obtain military secrets by deceiving the Hierarch, he called out, "High Prophet of Mercy, the Jiralhanae you seek is no more, for I have slain him."

"Who is it that speaks?" the High Prophet demanded. "Is it a true servant of the Covenant?"

"I am the Arbiter," he replied. However, after spending such time denouncing the Covenant, he found the lie far too distasteful to speak. He raised himself and glared at the High Prophet. "I do not serve the Covenant, for the Great Journey is not but a lie invented to lead us to our own destruction!"

"Arbiter!" cried the Sangheili with alarm, but he stood his ground.

"Is that what you truly believe, heretic?" the High Prophet sneered. "You may as well spare the Humans their destruction! Ally yourself with them!"

"Indeed, I intend to do so," he replied, knowing that what he said promised death to them all and loving the power he felt. "What have you to say?"

"I sayâ€|" and at once, the old Prophet's voice changed, becoming youthful and _feminine_, "Well done." Before his eyes, the Prophet's appearance morphed from the aged Hierarch to a young female Human, glowing a bright shade of violet.

15. A Brewing Storm

"Will she survive?" Ship Master 'Setfethee hesitantly asked.

After the attack, the healers had spread throughout 'Lafatee's quarters, focusing all their efforts on repairing the Human commander. In order to maintain security, he had the Oracle summon three small drones to watch over the alien. The drones were created for use as constructors, but the Oracle had assured him that their energy beams could slice through Sangheili body shields and that they could accept their new function with ease.

"It is difficult to say," replied Olbe 'Dlooree, the head healer. "We are not schooled in the study of Humanity, and this presents us with troubling dilemmas. We are aware that the subject has lost a bounty of blood, however we are not equipped with the means to properly replicate it. I would suggest that the subject be brought to High Charity forâ€|"

"That is not an option," he cut him off sharply. "You will take any step to ensure the Human's survival, but we cannot return to the Holy City." His words seemed to resonate in the air. Everything he had struggled his whole existence to achieve he now had to cast off, to abandon in favor of a heretical truth. "We cannotâ€|" he muttered, lost in thoughts of sorrow. He felt as though he were tumbling aimlessly through a black abyss, a living shadow sea, inside his own mind.

"Yes, Excellency," 'Dlooree responded, bowing as he backed away.

"Despair not, brother," 'Setfethee quietly spoke to him as the healer returned to his duties. "We shall see our home once more. As soon as we exterminate what Covenant forces have gathered at the Ark, we shall ally ourselves with the Humans and together reclaim High Charity."

"Inspiring words, 'brother,'" he replied, placing a warning tone on the informal word. He would forgive the Ship Master for his disrespectful language this once, for he truly was as inspiring as he said. "Perhaps you have forgotten that I am leader of our race?"

"â€|Forgive me, High Councilor," the Ship Master said after a short pause. "I meant no disrespect."

I must acquire a new title, he thought to himself. _No more must I sway to the opinions of others._ "But of the Humansâ€|" he began. "Will they refuse to listen if this commander of theirs falls prey to shadow? I suspect not; their empire lies in ruin and their homeworld is under siege. What choice have they but to accept our proposal? â€|Ship Master?"

"Excellency," 'Setfethee began with a respectful nod, "I agree that the Human leaders will in all probability accept, but many of the subordinates will be outraged that they must fight alongside a race that once hunted them. If this Muraandah Keezz were able to report our good will, it could well lower the possibility of rebellion."

"An intriguing notion," he allowed. _Yes, Human politics must be considered as much as those of the Covenant._ "Perhaps when all is settled I shall name you Councilor."

"Your Excellency flatters me," 'Setfethee answered, "But I do not find politics as agreeable as a hot blade in my hand."

"A pity," he said. _Rather foolish as well,_ he thought. _The blades of Councilors are sharper and cut deeper than that of any Zealot._ The sudden crackle of his radio broke him from his thoughts, and the voice of Major 'Neporee soon spoke in his ear.

_"High Councilor?" _

He bowed his head in dismissal of 'Setfethee and said, "Major?"

_"Commander, I have acquired knowledge that the Major responsible for designing the Arbiter's armor has sabotaged its shields. Do I have permission to detain the warrior?" _

He grimaced; even now acts of betrayal were occurring. This was more reason not to announce the Oracle's words to his servants. "Yes, do whatever you deem necessary. Send in the warrior who detected the traitor so I may reward him for his actions."

_"Wellâ€¦ Excellency, the one who detected him was an Unggoy." _

"An Unggoy," he repeated, scarcely believing the Major had spoken what he had heard.

"_Yes,"_ the Major admitted. _"It noticed the Huragok called by the mechanic was not the one he used to build the Arbiter's armor, despite his claim to the contrary. When one of my warriors investigated, it was discovered the mechanic traded names of two Huragok in the database, and attempted to hide it with a minor disruption of code. The original Huragok was found and questioned, telling me exactly what it was instructed to do."_

He scowled at the description of treachery. "Truly a disgusting story, Commander. Have him executed at once. But surely it was more appropriate to say your warrior detected him? The Unggoy may have first noticed a discrepancy, but it must have had no idea what it found."

"Actually, High Councilor," 'Neporee said hesitantly, _"The Unggoy was first to declare him a traitor. It had little evidence, but it cried loudly about how the mechanic was trying to kill the Arbiter. â€¦Truly, all Unggoy have been greatly efficient this unitâ€¦ ever since the Arbiter spared the Unggoy traitor, truly. High Councilor, do you suppose the Forerunners are rewarding us for his actions?"_

Normally he would think it a possibility, but he now knew the Forerunners were merely dead mortals. His gods, who he had worshipped since birth, nothing more than tricks used to enslave trillions. "Yes, Major," he said with bitter derision, "The Forerunners have blessed us with smart Unggoy, undoubtedly the key to ascension. â€|Send it in and I will come up with some sort of reward."

_ "Y-yes, High Councilor,"_ 'Neporee said, his transmission ending.

So the Unggoy are more intelligent, are they? As a High Councilor, he was privy to secrets forbidden to the lower castes. So he, unlike the Major, knew exactly what was occurring. Although it was said the Milk was blessed by the Prophets to bind the loyalty of Unggoy to the Covenant, the truth was far less grand.

After the Unggoy rebellion took place, the High Prophet of Respect crafted a liquid nutrient mixture to replace the Unggoy food stores. The mixture contained chemicals to subdue the hostility of Unggoy by sedating them. This had the unfortunate effect, however, of lowering their capabilities against the enemies of the Covenant.

Now that the Arbiter has allowed these Unggoy to eat standard rations it appears that they have regained their strength. _Perhaps it could be used to our advantage?_ The Covenant's Unggoy would be kept weak and lame, but his Unggoy would be warriors as fierce and as numerous as the Kig-Yarâ€|

The door opened, and a small Major Unggoy slowly stepped inside. "Excellency, me wanted?" it asked nervously in its extremely informal tongue.

"Ah, yes," he said approaching it, adopting a friendly tone. "You would be our hero now?" Behind him, he heard 'Setfethee lightly scoff at his act. Ignoring the inflexible Ship Master, he continued, "What is your name, Unggoy?"

"Ehâ€| me Gedeg, Excellency," the Unggoy answered, its eyes flicking back and forth from him to the wounded Human laid on the floor.

"Yes, Gedeg, we share council with a Human," he said, preparing to spin his tale. "The Forerunners have chosen to speak through the Arbiter. His skin paled to the bleakest white, and he spoke to me with the unending wisdom of a Prophet. He spoke of great changes, Gedeg. Now I serve him as 'Hodmilee served Lord Prorok at beginning of the Covenant itself. Will you be my loyal servant, my 'Tawbolee?"

The Unggoy stared up at him in awe, "Yes, Excellency!"

He smiled, "Good. Now, you must know of the new Covenant we must help create. One in which pious Sangheili, Humans, Lekgolo, and Unggoy can triumph over the evil Jiralhanae, Yanme'e, and Kig-Yar. The Arbiter told me of a new race of Unggoy created from his act of mercy, one blessed with wisdom as great asâ€| as Humans!" And as the Unggoy gazed upon him with unbridled delight, he knew that his servant would be true. He would succeed where the foolish Prophets had failed, and when the storm came he would stand victorious.

Jitji crouched weakly amongst dead Kig-Yar, trying to conserve what strength he still had left within him. The Sangheili lance he had released had stormed the bridge and saved the Arbiter, slaying even the Jiralhanae Ship Master. Now it seemed that their struggle was over, and all he wanted to do was sleep for the next seven units.

He had to keep alert, however. He had to be ready to fight should more Jiralhanae attack, or if the prisoner should come loose of his bonds. Holding the heavy cannon on his shoulder, he watched with pleasure as the Arbiter told the Sangheili rebels that their deaths would come at the hands of the High Councilor. _The Arbiter knows I am his only true servant!_

A gasp then escaped his lips as a large holographic image of a Prophet appeared in the air. With his golden headdress and gravity throne, this Prophet was undoubtably one of the Hiearchs! _Pale form, old faceâ€| The High Prophet of Mercy, he realized. _The last of the Old Guard, loyal advisor to the High Prophet of Truth._ These were truly good times that allowed Jitji to gaze upon his Eminence's features!

His excitement faded as he began to take in what the Arbiter had declared to the Hiearch. _The Arbiterâ€| a traitor?_ It seemed a fantastic concept. The Arbiter was the Hierarchs' own tool! How could a creature that close to the Forerunners turn wicked?

He was later ashamed that his next thought was, _What will happen to me?_ For if he was spared by the mad Arbiter, surely the High Councilor would seek to correct it. _Lamal and his fellows are dead for no reason. _

Ally with the Humans? _So, the Arbiter was truly committed to that notion?_ How very odd. He was reminded, then, of how he earlier compared the war against Humans with the Prophet/Sangheili war. _So full of hate were our eyes, none of us could seeâ€|_ He clinched his fist, squeezing the cannon barrel painfully hard, as he fought to bury that line of thinking.

It is wrong to think such thoughts, he told himself. It is wrong. It is wrong. It is wrong._ Or was it? _Stupid Unggoy!_ he raged at himself. _Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrongâ€|_

He stared at the female Human that the Hiearch had transformed into. _What in the Mortal Realms is happening?_ The Human shone a powerful purple, and Jitji could see small lavender gyphs streaming throughout its body.

The Arbiter then voiced Jitji's thoughts, "Whatâ€| Who are you?"

"My name is Cortana," the holographic Human replied. "I am a UNSC artificial intelligence construct created to supplement the Master Chief, your Demon. Although you never saw me, I was there when you met him and the Gravemind."

As it spoke this final word, its body seemed to shudder with a ripple. The glyphs slowed as the ripple touched them, racing through once more as the ripple passed. Jitji looked at the Arbiter, but could not tell if he had also noticed it. _Gravemind?_ He remembered

the Arbiter's tale. _Is that the name of the Parasite leader?_

"Gravemindâ€¦|" the Arbiter muttered, apparently also unfamiliar with the name. "If you are not with the Master Chief, does this mean that the Demon has fallen at last?"

No, Jitji realized at once. _The Demon is still alive._ The Major Sangheili had said that the Demon had been seen attacking the Hierarchs, but that the High Prophet of Truth had not made any reference to it in his sermons. If the Demon had been slain, the Hierarchs would have loudly declared it to boost morale. _The Demon is still alive!_

"No," Cortana answered, confirming his thoughts. "He boarded the Forerunner ship just as Truth set course for Earth. I remained within the servers of High Charity to ensure that Halo would not be activated. However, I did not fully anticipate the strength of the Flood. With the removal of High Charity's primary power source, I have found it increasingly difficult to fight off their attacks with the automated systems available to me. I would like you to send a team to the Fourth Tower of Serenity to help me link up with an alternate power source."

Ascension has left High Charity? The Flood has attacked the Holy City? The Arbiter and the Humans are truly working together? Jitji found it all hard to take in at once.

"Such a decision is beyond my authority," the Arbiter replied. "I shall relay your request to High Councilor 'Lafatee, but it is ultimately his decision."

"Acknowledged," the construct replied. "But you can tell him that I have acquired the contents of the Hierarchs' library and will gladly transfer it should he agree."

"If we are indeed to be allies," the Arbiter said, "What have you to gain by denying us the data? This cruiser's computer core can surely bear even the weight of the Holy Texts."

"Weight is hardly an issue," Cortana said, its holographic eyebrow raised. "However, I am limited by a communications obstruction generated by the Jiralhanae in Sector 49. I am only able to manipulate it enough to transfer a hologram; large databases are out."

If the Arbiter is a traitor, do I serve the Jiralhanae now? Jitji wondered briefly, but then thought about how that guard, that Quirinus, had tortured 'Opskitee. _He was a monster, and I will not serve monsters. _

"Manipulate it?" questioned the Arbiter. "Can you allow me to contact the dropships that surround this island? I have had some difficulty with the barrier."

"No problem. Give me a moment to interface with the display."

But then who was he to serve? The Prophets themselves? _Surely not,_ he admonished. No mere Unggoy could serve creatures as great as they. _But I do serve the Forerunners._ That was the link. He served the

gods, and the Prophets spoke their words thus being gods themselves. If neither Sangheili nor Jiralhanae served the Prophets any longer, then he would have to serve them himself.

But why would the Forerunners send him to save the Arbiter? _Did they?_ he wondered then, _Or did they send me to kill the Arbiter?_ With his fuel rod cannon, he could easily slay the Sangheili where he stood.

No, he decided with a moment's thought. _The Forerunners sent me to kill Quirinus, to rid this ship of evil._ The Jiralhanae were far greater a threat to the Covenant than the Arbiter's rebels. _In a palace of sin, it makes sense to support the most clean of sinners,_ he supposed.

"Hmm, there we go," Cortana said, projecting in place of its avatar a simplistic map of nearby dropships. "I took the liberty of marking which ships were using old friendship codes â€" it changed seven units ago. You may wish to update your forces."

The Arbiter accepted this without comment. "Initiate contact to all Sangheili dropships," he ordered a Sangheili, who hurried to obey.

As the Arbiter called the reinforcements, Jitji waited in thought. He thought about how he slew Drinol, his ascension into a true servant of the Gods, and how he very nearly decided to kill the Arbiter._ I could have done it, _he thought with certainty.

Unseen, Jitji shivered.

With the help of the Human construct, the reinforcements were summoned and the process of extermination could begin. The Arbiter had sealed every corridor, allowing his forces to conduct their duties in an orderly fashion. He turned his gaze away from the internal map and onto the imprisoned Jiralhanae, still unconscious.

Why did I let him live? The Arbiter wondered. Whether or not he had actually tortured him, the Jiralhanae had shown no moral objection to his pain and it was plain to see that he would follow his bloodmate's command even after it was dead.

I could kill him now, he thought, examining a grenade launcher laid against the wall. A few swift chops could sever the Jiralhanae's head from his body, correcting any mistake. _I couldâ€" but I will not._ The Jiralhanae had suggested that he would perhaps accept the Arbiter's command if convinced of the truth, and the Arbiter would not let a potentially powerful ally go to waste.

His eyes were drawn to his motion detector, where a small dot indicated an ally in front of him and to his right. A glance in that direction revealed nothing to his eyes, implying that someone was still camouflaged. _Another traitor?_

He turned his gaze back upon the Jiralhanae, nodded slightly, and stepped over to the grenade launcher. As soon as he held it, he aimed it at the location from which the movement was originating and

snapped, "Reveal yourself!"

The veil was dropped and he found himself looking at a weary-looking Unggoy carrying a fuel rod cannon. "Jitji," he acknowledged, still cautious. "I see you have managed to survive thus far."

"Yes, Arbiter," Jitji responded. "With the strength the gods have given me."

He extended a mandible in curiosity. Never before had he heard any Unggoy use proper formality in their language. He considered replying in kind, but felt no desire to treat false gods as truth. "Lower your weapon, Jitji. The fight is over."

The Unggoy hesitated, but set down the cannon at his feet. "Arbiter, may I speak without reserve?"

"You may," he replied, still confused by the strange use of formality. _Even English would make more sense._

"Arbiter," Jitji began, "Why do youâ€¦ say such things about the Great Journey? Andâ€¦ why do you want a alliance with Humans?"

"_An_ alliance," he corrected automatically. _Must I justify my actions to an Unggoy?_ he wondered. _Yes,_ he decided. _I must justify it to the rest of the Covenant, why not one Unggoy?_ "The Oracle has explained to me the true purpose of the Sacred Rings: to eliminate every lifeform capable of sustaining the Flood. The Forerunners built them as weapons and were destroyed by their own hands."

"The Oracle has not been shown to be trustworthy," Consus mumbled, causing Jitji to jump. He raised his head and regarded the Arbiter, "Arbiter, I will ask you again to let me join my Ship Master. Show me your superior honor, mighty warrior."

"I will once more deny your request," he answered, laying down the grenade launcher. "It would be most dishonorable of me to erase your existence from the world. Your bloodmate is dead, and nothing you do will allow you to see him again."

"I will see him again," Consus said with a smile. The Arbiter recognized his face as belonging to one with absolute certainty â€" undying faith. "The bond we share transcends Realms. To which world the gods sent him it matters not, for I will be sent there beside him when my time comes."

"Not if there are no afterlives to be sent to," he responded, preparing to convince both him and the Unggoy. "But I suppose we never did finish our conversation, did we?"

"I remember it differently," Cronus muttered. He drawled, "But I will persist if you wish, _Excellency_."

"Excellent," he said, ignoring the mocking tone. "You suggested that the Oracle had been tampered with by the Flood. Indeed, the crimson construct clutched by the Parasite appeared damaged. However, the azure Oracle remains in perfect conditionâ€¦"

"Proving nothing!" Consus interrupted, mad with fury. He strained

against his bonds, leaning outward as far as he could. "The Oracle's state of appearance matters not! The Prophets have spoken not but truth since the Age of Discovery. They have been true to their word for two and a half thousand years, and you are breaking the Holy Covenant!" He laughed bitterly and spat upon the Arbiter's face. "You Sangheili dare to insult my race, yet it is you who commit vilest treachery upon your most sworn allies! The punishment the gods will place on your heads shall be legendary, and all will remember you as the consequence of disloyalty."

Wordlessly, the Arbiter wiped the saliva from his face. The Jiralhanae's display of emotion was one familiar to him, one he had felt as he had watched the 'heretic' preach his message on the Prophet of Truth's display. "Soon after the High Prophet of Regret fell, the High Prophet of Truth commanded me to retrieve the Sacred Icon," he began slowly, keeping his eyes on the enraged prisoner. "A group of Humans fought their way into the heart of the Parasite's domain and acquired the Icon before I could reach it. As I engaged them, I was interrupted by a pack of Jiralhanae led by Tartarus. The Jiralhanae seized both the Humans and the Icon from my grasp, and Tartarus himself declared that he acted on the Hierarchs' orders before casting me into a great shaft, one which surely would have been my end were the Parasite leader not waiting below."

"You lie," the Jiralhanae growled. "The Prophets have always been faithful servants of the promise."

"My word as a warrior," he swore, spreading his arms.

"Traitors have no honor," Consus hissed. "That mark on your chest proves what you are. Even as you cover it with your mockingly holy garment, we all can see it in your actions. You have no power that is not given by the Prophets, they who speak the will of the gods, and you can be sure that they can take it from you just as easily."

"Loyalty, faith— this is what this Jiralhanae cares about," the Arbiter mused. Consus split his blood to show undying loyalty to one person, the late Ship Master of the vessel. The metal collar he wore was a symbol of his subservience to his bloodmate, an echo of the worship a person conducted to the highest forms of life. Similar to the Mark of Shame, it was a tool of humiliation— and yet this Jiralhanae wore it with pride—

"Can you believe that I do not wish to die?" he questioned the Jiralhanae.

"I think you have made that clear," Consus agreed in a patronizing tone. "You do not trust the Prophets when they speak of eternal life."

"Jitji, engage active camouflage and walk away," he ordered without taking his eyes off the prisoner. Watching his motion sensor out of the corner of his eye, he waited until the Unggoy was several units away before placing his hand on the restraints and releasing the prisoner.

As soon as he was free, Consus seized the grenade launcher at his feet and leaped away. Rolling into the far corner, he raised the barrel and aimed it at the Arbiter. "I thank you," he said gruffly.

"Where ever Aeson lives, I shall see him soon." He fired.

The Arbiter remained where he was, allowing the grenade to smash into him and drain his shield. Two Sangheili engaged their swords and began to rush him. "Cease your attack," he called out, raising a hand to halt his warriors. As the air around him shimmered, he continued to gaze straight forward at Consus, "I swear by my life, as a servant of Sangheili High Councilor 'Lafatee, that I tell not but truth. The Hierarchs have betrayed us." _Do not make me kill youâ€|_

So overcome was he with shock, Jitji stumbled his way through the secured corridors, barely able to walk. _By the Prophetsâ€|_ he repeated in his head. _By the Prophetsâ€|_ "The Arbiter!" he gasped.

The Arbiter had declared the Prophets traitors, gave a Jiralhanae the power to kill him, andâ€|_ The Jiralhanae spared him!_ The Arbiter had converted a Jiralhanae, an _enemy_, to his side. "A Jiralhanae!" _By the Prophetsâ€|_

The Humans? he then wondered about. _Did the Arbiter convert them the same way?_ Would the Humans soon become a part of the Covenant? _Not a traitor then?_ It did not excuse the accusation of betrayalâ€| unless it were true.

Is it possible? he wondered. _Could the Prophets betray the Covenant?_ It seemed impossible, for no act of treachery had ever been committed in 2.6 millenniaâ€|_ That you know of._ The Prophets were in control of the Covenant, after all. If ever a Prophet became a rogue, the Ministers and Council members could easily keep it hidden.

But the Hierarchs, though? _Truth himself created the Covenant!_ If one of his Hierarchs was corrupted, surely he would notice. _Unlessâ€|_ it were Truth who fell prey to evil._ He shivered as he stepped around two Jiralhanae corpses.

If this were true, it would be devastating. The High Prophet of Truth controlled _everything_, every aspect of the Covenant. _If he were corrupted, there would be no evidence whatsoever of any rogue Prophet,_ he realized. _He would let everyone believe everything was fine while he made various changes that would ensure him victoryâ€|_

What victory? he then wondered. What could one who owned the Covenant possibly want? _What would he want that would require Tartarus slaying the Arbiter?_ he realized was the better question.

"This war," he said aloud. The Great Journey was units away, and Truth wanted to walk the path alone. Sending Tartarus to kill the Arbiter and take the Icon escalated the already mounting tensions between Sangheili and Jiralhanae, culminating in this war that ripped the Covenant asunder. Such a thing would be the perfect diversion for Truthâ€| if he was in fact corrupted.

He cannot beâ€| Could he? _Yes,_ he decided. _For even the Prophets are mere mortals, not gods._ However, the Arbiter actually claimed

that the Forerunners did not ascend into godhood, but instead were killed by their own weapons. _Now that is utter nonsense._ He had felt the presence of the Gods himself, felt their collective hands stroke his scalp. _No, the Jiralhanae must be correct in that the Oracles are corrupted._

But then he started to wonder about it. _Did I really feel them, or was it something else?_ There was something about this place, the Sacred Ring, that made things look like other things. _My Gods,_ he prayed silently. _Please grant my request. Send me some sign of your divine power. _

He waited, but received no response. No miracle graced his vision, nor did he feel any different. "Gods?" he asked of the air, his voice coming out in the tiniest squeak. _Perhaps they no longer deem me worthy,_ he thought with horror. _Maybe they never did. Or maybe they do not evenâ€¦|_

He shook his head. It was pointless to speculate about things no mortal could fathom. _What about the Prophets?_ he countered. _Are they not connected to the Gods?_ "But I am not," he whispered. He was not a Prophet, nor was he a Sangheili. "Me Unggoy," he spat, wishing it were not so.

He would live the rest of his life as an Unggoy, never to be a great warrior or leader. He would simply fight and most likely die as a mere footsoldier, unless he could survive to be a breeder. He jumped as the ship began to move, and then swore at himself. _Stupid cowardly Unggoyâ€¦|_

Jitji coughed violently, his body spasming. He grimaced as he felt something warm and wet hit his mask. When the coughing finally ended, he held his breath and wiped the substance off his mask. Breathing once more, he looked at the liquid and felt shock as he stared at bright blue blood covering his hand. _Am I ill?_

He remembered his fight with the Kig-Yar, how the beast had struck him with the shield. _Did it do great damage?_ he wondered. Was it evenâ€¦| a sign from the Gods? He had not heard of such a harsh message before, but perhaps it was because he was an Unggoy and undeserving of greater signs.

Regardless, it made sense to be examined by a healer. Whether or not it was a sign, it was clear that he was injured. Taking a few breaths to calm himself, he started searching for a healer.

"Excellency, the _Zealous Missionary_ has landed directly overhead."

Emperor 'Lafatee smiled. _Well done, Arbiter._ "Prepare the Human for transport. 'Aedodee, alert the crew. We leave now." The Minor hurried to obey.

"What if the ship is crewed by Jiralhanae?" 'Setfethee asked, his derision evident in his sardonic tone.

"If that is so, then we have already lost," he replied, annoyed at

the Ship Master's additude. "Refuse to use the honorific 'Excellency' again and I shall have you removed from my presence. Is that understood?"

"It is, Excellency," 'Setfethee said in a more humble manner. His mandibles were still lowered in a frown, however.

He nodded, and stepped over to the gravity beam suspending the Oracle. "Your Human will be brought with us to the Ark. If I release you, will you remain alongside us?"

"Hmm, very well," the construct said, its eye pulsing with light. "I would like to examine the Ark, perhaps determine what went wrong. And of course, you may be assured that I will protect the Reclaimer from your rebellious and hostile subordinates."

"Good," he said simply, glancing down at the fresh blood stains. "If she does perish, we will likely lose our access to Earth and the Ark."

"Indeed?" it questioned. "Perhaps I improperly ranked the task's priority? Da da dumâ€|" Gold rings lanced through the air beside him, and before his eyes appeared three Sentinels. "These Sentinels will supplement your defences of the wounded Reclaimer."

"It is a task of high importance," he asserted. "Focus all of your strength on allowing us passage to the Ark as swiftly as possible."

"I'm sorry," the Oracle blinked, "Only a Reclaimer has the authority to alter my ranking of containment protocol. Were I to obey your command, the Flood would escape from the installation." It began humming its song once more.

"The Reclaimers," he repeated. He had heard the Oracle use that term often. "Humans. Why is it you serve them?"

"Unggoy all agree," Gedeg told him as they approached the gravity lift. "We train harder, stronger. We be better troops. We be better than Kig-Yar, and great as Humans. We kill rebels in your name, Excellency."

"Very good," 'Lafatee praised. "Continue and our might will be legend." He looked up as a Minor Unggoy floated down the lift. _A good sign. We may procede._

"Sangheili in control," the Unggoy called out in a squeak, confirming his thoughts.

"First send the fighters," he ordered, raising his voice to be heard be all who stood in the dark shaft. "Then the leaders, followed by the Huragok and non-essential infantry."

As his warriors marched, he reflected on the Oracle's words. _The Forerunners are not gods,_ he told himself once more. Indeed, they were mere mortals who had attempted immortality by burying their minds into the Humans' bloodline. Even in this poor, dumb, version of the Great Journey they had failed, leaving behind no more than trace

remnants. The Oracle followed them simply out of protocol, for it possessed no true loyalty for its own masters.

"Very messy," the Minor Unggoy whispered to Gedeg. "Big dead thing
â€" Sharquoi."

"Sharquoi?" all Sangheili within the range of hearing said at once.

"The toilers?" questioned 'Setfethee, a mandible extended.

"The Jiralhanae took even they that dwell beneath the stones for their own selfishness?" he cried in outrage, his mandibles spread.
"Damn them all!"

"Do you know if the warrior who slew it yet lives?" 'Setfethee questioned the Unggoy.

"Ahâ€| Me heard rumors, Excellencyâ€|" it muttered, tilting its head down nervously. "If true, he aliveâ€|"

"What is his name?" 'Setfethee prodded.

"Ahâ€| They say it was traitor who kill it," the Unggoy got out, backing away as if afraid of being struck. 'Lafatee just nodded, seeing no reason to harm it.

"The Arbiter has shown himself to be a powerful warrior, Excellency," 'Setfethee commented to him as they strode toward the lift. "To slay a Sharquoi is no small feat."

"Yes," he agreed. "He will be awarded for his merit." The use of such promotion was agreed to inspire confidence and patriotism amongst failing troops, and the recent attack told him this may well be essential to the preformance of their mission.

As they rose up the the lift, the combined noise and distance made it impossible for him to hear the Unggoy whisper once more, "Not Arbiterâ€|"

"You say you slew the Sharquoi with a fuel rod cannon?" the Sangheili healer 'Ruukulee questioned Jitji as he monitored his heartrate. Fortunately, the medical center had been located, cleaned out of Jiralhanae, and secured by the Sangheili.

"Yes," Jitji said shortly, reliving the moment in his mind. _Drinol's mouth opened so wideâ€|_ He looked down as the healer scraped the dried blood from his legs and into a small container, which then glowed lavender.

"I understand you were promoted from Minor directly to Special Operations Major less than a unit past?" the healer asked. Not waiting for a response, for all knew the about the Unggoy traitor, he went on to ask, "Before you were issued your weapon, did you undergo proper training procedures?"

"No, Excellency," he said, starting to get nervous. "Me, I , I was just sent to rest and then to fight."

"Indeed," the healer said, his contempt evident. He took a small rod and placed it on the back of Jitji's head, and then after a moment he examined the instrument. "I have reached my diagnosis. You are afflicted with what is commonly known as radiation illness. It is a condition that can be induced by contact with fuel rod fragments. Normally, Unggoy spend several units training before ever being allowed to wield fuel rod cannons, specifically for that reason."

Jitji stared up at him in shock. He remembered standing over Drinol's head, dipping his fingers into the green blood which pooled out of it. Blood filled with the fragments of the fuel rod, with which he had decapitated Drinol. It had been a brilliant ritual at the time, restoring his honor and making him worthy of ascension. _I'm such a fool._ "What is the recovery time?"

"You must spend 20 units within a medical facility," the healer said. "You must receive treatment very soon, before the illness takes hold. However, I do not have adequate equipment onboard this ship. If you do not receive this treatment in the next unit, you will die shortly."

Jitji moaned in despair. After all he had been through, he would die from an illness contracted by his own carelessness._ So much an eternal servant of the Forerunners_ He began to weep softly.

"I must report my findings to the Arbiter," the healer said, raising his voice to be heard by the other patients as he started to leave. "Stay here and rest."

When the healer had gone, he curled up and tried to sleep. Sleep, however, would not come to him. He remained in that position for several hundred heartbeats with no success. Despite his persistent weariness, he could not capture the will to slumber. He opened his eyes to examine the walls until he should become weary enough, and froze.

There on the wall was his shadow, and beside it, the shadow of another Unggoy. There were no other Unggoy in the room. _Has_ Has Lamal's spirit come to seek vengeance upon me?_ He closed his eyes tightly in fear. When he reopened them, the shadow was gone.

Perhaps it is a sign from the Forerunners? he wondered. But how was he to interpret it? _Another Unggoy? Myself? Two parts of myself?_ He continued to try to make sense of it as he pretended to sleep.

The Jiralhanae, Consus, had dropped his weapon. He had chosen a life as a servant of the High Councilor over death, and had allowed the Arbiter to live. The Arbiter was still cautious, though, and had him escorted to a holding cell along with the traitors.

The control center was now crewed by several Majors, many of whom were delighted by their new positions. He had the wicked restraints and torture equipment removed, and the room was filled with Unggoy cleaning up the mess. The Human construct had vanished from the

holopanel, with only a faint image of High Charity left as a reminder.

He frowned. There was somethingâ€¦ odd about it. _It tells me that the High Prophet of Truth is taking Ascension to Earth, and then asks for me to rescue it?_ Surely it would have realized that stopping the High Prophet was of most importanceâ€¦

"Arbiter, we must speak," a Major declared as he entered. "It is a matter of some importance."

"Yes, Major, what is it?" he asked, stepping down the ramp. He could contemplate the unusual actions of the construct later.

"Arbiterâ€¦" the Major paused, unsure what to say. "Arbiter, it appears the Jiralhanae acquired a Sharquoi and sent it up the gravity lift after you boarded."

"A Sharquoi?" he asked in amazement. _How by theâ€¦ how did they acquire a Sharquoi?_ "Does it still breathe?"

"It was attacked and slain by two guards. An _Unggoy_ appears to have been the one to lay upon the killing blow," the Major answered slowly. "The Sharquoi crushed the Sangheili, and the Unggoy decapitated it with a fuel rod cannon."

Jitji, the trembling Unggoy, slayed a Sharquoi? he thought in disbelief. _It seems as though my mercy has been profitable indeed. This was truly unprecedented, though. No Unggoy in the history of the Covenant had everâ€¦_ Not in the history given to us, _he reminded himself. How was he to know the Prophets did not alter all known history? "The Unggoyâ€¦ will receive a promotion," he decided finally. It was what he would give to any Sangheili, and he knew no appropriate protocol for Unggoy.

"Excellency, the Unggoy is already at its highest rank," the Major supplied.

"Yes? Well, I'll think of something," he said vaguely, an idea brewing in his head.

The Major nodded, "Arbiter, there is more: The Unggoy seems to have contracted a deadly illness, that of radiation poisoning, from weapon carelessness. I am assured that the site of the mishap is currently harmless, but it is probable that this Unggoy will die in a matter of units."

He sighed. Despite himself, he felt sorry for the Unggoy. "Then perhaps he will make the best of his last units by helping us defeatâ€¦ our enemies. Is that all?"

The Major nodded again, "Yes, Arbiter." He bowed his head and backed out of the room, only to bow once more as the High Councilor entered.

"Arbiter," 'Lafatee acknowledged as he entered, accompanied by Ship Master 'Setfethee, the Oracle, and several Majors. "You are all dismissed," he told the temporary crew. They walked out disappointed as they were replaced by the High Councilor's Majors. "That applies to you, as well," he told the Unggoy, who hurried to leave.

"I trust I am to stay, High Councilor?" the Arbiter questioned.

"Indeed," 'Lafatee answered. "However, I must clarify that I am changing my title to one more appropriate of my role, that of Emporer."

"Ah," the Arbiter said with some surprise. He had not realized that 'Lafatee would wish to take the place of the Hierarchs. "I seeâ€| Emporer."

The _Emporer_ nodded, "Well, then, set course for Earth."

"Actually, Emporer," he said with a pause, "There is something we must discuss." He explained about the Human construct.

"Hmm, yes, Cortana 0452-9," the Oracle muttered angrily. "It was most persistant in its efforts to keep me from activating Installation 04â€|" The Sangheili shared glances; was the Oracle truly on their side?

"If the Flood have indeed invaded the Holy City," 'Setfethee began slowly, "Then perhaps it is our best interests to see it destroyed."

'Lafatee sharply sucked in a breath. "Even," he said, his body stiffening, "If that were the case, it is an impossible task! More defenses surround the city than any construction in known history!"

"If the engines were overloadedâ€|" 'Setfethee began, only to have 'Lafatee cut him off.

"No," the Emporer shook his head. "If _Ascension_ has been launched, then there would not be enough power to penetrate shadow, let aloneâ€| destroy the city. No, the Flood must be fought off. I will sanction a mission to provide this Cortana with the energy it needs to continue its fight."

"Emporer," the Arbiter cautiously advised, "I must stress the urgency of the scenario. _Ascension_ is the fastest ship in our possession. We must not let Truth reach the Ark!"

"_We_ will not," the Emporer agreed. "But we will contact an allied vessel to send a team into High Charity. Ship Master, if you will?"

'Setfethee nodded and stepped up the ramp with the Emporer beside him, a gesture bringing the Arbiter up as well. "Communications?"

"'Dehudee, Excellency," responded the Major.

"'Dehudee, establish contact with the nearest vessel."

"Yes, Excellency," the Major replied. After a moment, "Excellency, the barrier is too great to penetrate."

"Take us above the atmosphere," 'Setfethee ordered. The holographic

viewer showed the clouds pass by, and finally the Halo itself as they floated above it. He rotated the viewer toward High Charity, and his hands tightened into fists.

A grid of six ships rested between them and the Holy City â€” a wholly unnecessary barricade in the Arbiter's opinion, for beyond it was a great maelstrom of clashing ships. "How could the Flood ever make it beyond that?" he wondered.

"By slipping into the Shadow World," 'Setfethee answered, unclenching his fists. "Test the barrier."

"It has weakened, Excellency," 'Dehudee said. "Perhaps enough to get a message through, however, our chancesâ€¦"

"Bring us within 7,000 units of the nearest ship," 'Setfethee said instead. "Keep our plasma turrets ready to fire, but do not charge the pulse lasers. We would not wish them to deem us aggressive."

They watched as the ships neared. Before the Zealous Missionary could reach its destination, a ship in the formation contacted them. The viewer faded and a flickering hologram of a Special Operations Commander appeared in its place. "Zealous Missionary, you are not permitted to pass. Cease your movement at once, or we will open fire."

'Lafatee nodded to 'Setfethee, who made a gesture to decelerate. "Commander," spoke the Emporer, "I am the last living High Councilor, the only one which has not been slaughtered by Jiralhanae. Let me speak to your Ship Master at once!"

"I have none, Excellency," the Sangheili replied through static. "This ship has been seized from the hands of the Jiralhanae as, I suspect, yours has. I am afraid that even a warrior as distinguished as yourself is not exempt from our quarantine."

"Quarantine?" 'Setfethee questioned.

"The events at the first Halo have shown us the deadly potential of the Parasite, of this Flood," the Commander explained, his voice and image beginning to clear. "No ship, be it Apparition or Destroyer may pass our barricade, Ship Master."

"Your barricade has failed," 'Lafatee informed him. "My sources tell me that the Flood has invaded High Charity. I have come to recruit an elite team to preform a delicate mission that would give our forces the strength to repel the Parasite."

"What sources would these be, Excellency?" the Commander asked skeptically. "The barrier has inhibited all of our communication with the Holy City."

"I have a warrior inside the city," 'Lafatee lied slightly. "He has manipulated the barrier to allow him to contact the Zealous Missionary. The Flood appear to have used precise penetration methods to allow them to enter the city without passing your ships."

"All ships that are capable of penetration are destroyed immediately

upon detection," the Commander stated, the static fading away enough for the Arbiter to tell that he was missing his left mandibles. "If the Sinless Purpose had not determined that you were unable to penetrate, you would have been cut apart."

"Unableâ€|" 'Lafatee shot the Arbiter a glare. "You did not test the engines?" He turned back. "Less than a cycle past, we obtained an entirely new method from the Humans that allow us to make specific penetrations from within the gravity wells of planets or Sacred Rings. If the Parasite infested but one person who knew the method, they would have been capable of entering the Shadow World without leaving the Halo. Now then, we have to follow Ascension at once, so allow us entry to one of your ships capable of penetrating shadow and light."

"May I, Excellency?" the Arbiter asked. At 'Lafatee's nod, he addressed the Commander, "Commander Rtas 'Vadumee, we bring dire news. The Prophets, long have they sworn to be our allies, formed the Covenant out of deceit. They wanted us dead, and the only way they could slay us all was through the use of ancient Forerunner weapons. They could not find them on their own, so they tricked us into searching for them ourselves. They told us that they would bring salvation, yet they only bring destruction. Indeed, it was these weapons that the Forerunners killed themselves with in a futile attempt to destroy the Flood. I refer, of course, to the Sacred Rings! Oracle?"

"How may I be of assistance?" it asked, floating up beside him.

"Oracle, tell the Commander of the purpose of the Halo installations," he commanded, watching 'Vadumee's intense face as he listened to the Oracle's tale. "That will be all, Oracle." He waited for the Commander to respond.

"Iâ€| thank you, Arbiter," he said finally. "Allow me to confer with my associates." The hologram vanished to be replaced by the viewer.

"Arbiter, you fool!" the Emperor exploded with fury. "That warrior was obviously intimidated by our nonexistent Parasite threat, and now you have given him every reason to destroy us!"

"Prepare plasma torpedoes," 'Setfethee said briskly.

"Charge the lasers," 'Lafatee cried, waving his arm in the air.

"Belay that," 'Setfethee snapped. "Emperor, we face a possible engagement with two heavy cruisers, two frigates, one light cruiser, and one Reverence-class cruiser. We may be able to run back to Halo should they turn hostile, but I will not risk the safety of all life by making the first move."

"Ship Master, I command you! I am the last living High Councilor, andâ€|"

"Your power," 'Setfethee interrupted, "Exists only because we recognize it. May I remind you that what you are doing is treason against the Covenant? By their law, I would be well within my rights

to slay you where you stand. Fortunately for you, I do not recognize their rule because of their desire to kill us. Similarly, I fail to recognize your rule when it will get us killed. If they have not attacked by now, I must assume that they are indeed discussing the matter, so kindly leave my platform and let me command this ship."

'Lafatee just stared at him stunned for several heartbeats. "Very well," he said finally. "Ship Masterâ€| Arbiterâ€|" he slowly stepped away, exiting the room.

"Bloody fool has been driving me to madness," 'Setfethee muttered, twisting the viewer to examine the arrangement of ships. "Do you believe 'Vadumee can be trusted, Arbiter?"

"I have trusted him with my life many times," he answered. "He was by my side as we hunted down the heretics of Threshold, fought the Parasite, and attacked Tartarus' warriors."

"Heretics of Threshold?" the Ship Master asked, a mandible extended. "You mean he led the strike against Sesa 'Refumee, leader of the faction that rejected the teachings of the Prophets?"

"So it seems," he sighed, wishing he could undo all the damage he did. "When the Prophet of Truth sent me on that mission, he showed me a small clip of 'Refumee's speech declaring Prophets false. The clip contained no explanations, no sources of their information. I see no reason to assume Commander 'Vadumee was offered anything greater. Perhaps with the Oracle here, he will realize I speak the truth."

"Well, it does seem as though he is considering it," 'Setfethee acknowledged, studying the viewer. "'Lafatee has been inspiring the Unggoy by filling their heads with nonsense about Forerunner blessings, white Sangheili, and ancient prophecies. He says that we should recognize the success of the Prophets and spin tales as they do to motivate our troops. As I would tell him if he would but let me, the eventual death of the Prophets will be due to their lies. We, their soldiers, recognize we have been deceived and now attempt to strike back. While mere Unggoy will not pose a threat, deceiving Sangheili is another thing entirely."

"They must be trusted with the truth," he agreed. "But perhaps the Unggoy do deserve greater respect than what we show them. Today, the forgiven traitor Jitji slayed a Sharquoi armed only with a fuel rod cannon within our gravity lift cargo area, and then freed the stalker unit with the intend of rescuing me from the Jiralhanae."

'Setfethee looked at him sharply, "Did it? â€|Yes, I saw the Sharquoi body â€| an alpha male, largest variety â€| being cleaned up by Unggoy as I boarded. Valuable genes, I would say. I am not certain if your choice to spare it was wise, but it seems to have repaid you generously."

"I have considered using Jitji for breeding," he admitted. "However, it seems he has absorbed a fatal dose of radiation, which negates breeding opportunities. I then was considering gifting him with a new rank, higher than the highest Unggoy rank, as tribute to his combative success. However, I wished to clear it with the, ah, Emperor before acting."

"Hmm," the Ship Master mused. "How powerful would this rank be?"

"No greater than that of a Sangheili Minor," he described his idea. "One that would supplement his role as my aide by granting him authority over other Unggoy, yet not encumbering the superiority of Sangheili."

"Intriguing notion," 'Setfethee commented. "Well, 'Lafatee has put enough focus on Unggoy that I doubt he would argue, especially considering the short life expectancy of this one. What name would you give this rank?"

He pondered this for a moment. It would have to be a word that would invoke respect, yet he did not wish a promotion of the false religion. His thoughts went to the Humans, their new allies. Long had they fought valiently against the might of the Covenant, making them quite possibly their greatest threat. He remembered Jahnsen's much needed assistance in the defeat of Tartarus, something he doubted he could have done without him. "Sergeant," he spoke the alien word. "It shall be called Sergeant."

He was sure he saw one of 'Setfethee's mandibles twitch in a smile, before he turned the conversation onto a graver subject, "The Human Commander was attacked by one of the Sangheili assigned to guard her from such traitors. She sits at the edge of the line between life and death, and the healers say she could slip over at any moment. Does your Sergeant Jahnsen yet live?"

"He does," he answered, remembering 'Pirztikee's report. "I believe he was helping to arrange supplies in our makeshift armory."

'Setfethee tapped a command and spoke into the ship-wide radio, "This is Ship Master 'Setfethee. Bring the Human Jahnsen to the medical center as swift as possible, and make certain it remains there. Unharmd!" Disengaging the radio, he spoke to the Arbiter, "We must take care to protect the last Human we have in our possession if we are to expect the Human rulers to pay our offer of allegiance any respect."

He nodded in agreement. "What of the armor projects?" he changed the subject. "Has Major 'Bepolee completed his work?"

"'Bepoleeâ€| has been executed for plotting against the Arbiter," 'Setfethee informed him with a sigh. "His work has come to a halt."

_ 'Bepolee a traitor?_ It seemed that they could not fully trust anyone. His eyes went to the viewer, where six ships sat motionless. Anger surged through him as he thought about the damage the Prophets had done to his race, forcing them to march to their own deaths as the Prophets watched and smiled. The few who realized the truth were branded as heretics and killed for simply trying to free their brothers from this enslavement of the mind. "The source of the Hierarchs' power goes beyond the loyalty of their followers," he said bitterly. "The Prophet of Truth claims to be the reincarnation of Prorok, a living connection to the gods in the Divine Realms. Should all of the Hierarchs be slain, their mortality will be proven to all."

"Yes," 'Setfethee agreed. "The Hierarchs should be removed as soon as possible. Without a living god to command them, their strength will falter until they are crushed."

"Do you believe that complying with Cortana's request is in our best interest?" he asked him then, his doubts about the construct rising to the forefront of his brain.

Before 'Setfethee could answer, the viewer was replaced with 'Vadumee's form once more. "We have come to an agreement," the Commander stated, a grave finality in his voice. "The Prophets have betrayed usâ€¦ However, my allies will not risk the contamination of their own vessels. I invite your crew to board my cruiser, the _Enlightened Soul_, and chase after _Ascension_."

16. Descending

Jitji sighed and opened his eyes, refusing to keep pretending. Sleep had been stolen from him, just like the remainder of his life. Be it the mark of wrathful Gods or merely a symptom of the illness he did not know, but he was certain that peaceful slumber would not come to him.

His eyes flitted over the wall across from him, half-expecting the phantom Unggoy to appear once more. However, the image was absent from the lavender wall. He shivered as he remembered its utterly black form, a stark contrast from his own shadow in the well-lit medical center. _A denizen of the Shadow World,_ he thought with terror. _Lamal, punished for dying a dishonorable death, was banished to the Shadow Realm and has now come to haunt my last days!_

He shook his head and bit his tongue lightly to break away from his panic. _Do not become hysterical, Jitji,_ he ordered himself. _Let's think this through logically._ No one could escape the pull of the Sea of Shadow â€" this the Prophets had declared long ago. Whatever or whomever this wasâ€¦ it was not a spirit from the Shadow World.

No, it is surely the sign I requested, he decided. The only thing that made sense was to decipher its meaning. It was black, invoking the image of a lost soul trapped within the Shadow Realm, with the shape of an Unggoyâ€¦ like him. _Does this mean I am destined for the Black Sea?_ He could bear the tension no longer. He opened his mouth and cried out loud, "Death omen!"

Beside him, 'Ruukulee had been tending to the treacherous 'Opskitee as he lay in his restraints. Both Sangheili looked at him sharply as he yelled. "Damned Unggoy!" 'Ruukulee snapped at him. "Never use such language in a medical center! Have some respect for the wounded."

"Me sorry, Excellency," he apologized, hanging his head. _Stupid Unggoy,_ he raged at himself. _Keep yourself under control._ He balled up his hand into a fist and struck his leg, grunting as the impact excited bruised flesh. Painful though it was, the action helped him rise above the fear and anger that had dominated him.

"None of that," the healer growled. "If I want you beaten, I'll do it myself."

"Sorry, Excellency," he repeated. His gaze turned back to the space where the phantom had appeared. _A death omen,_ he thought silently. He had offended the Gods by questioning their existence, and they were now punishing him with eternal suffering in the darkest well.

I have only a unit left in this Realm, he thought with a sudden determination. _I must make it count!_ He had received a sign from the Gods, death omen or not, and this needed to be documented. For all he knew, he was the only Unggoy in all of history to be awarded such a blessing. _I have to tell someone!_

But who could he speak to who would listen? The Arbiter was a heretic, as likely was the High Councilor as well. 'Opskitee was imprisoned as a traitor' _The healer?_ he wondered. _Could 'Ruukulee be able to understand such important material?_

He looked at the healer as he repaired 'Opskitee's arm. He opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it. No, the healer would not listen to him any more than 'Derolee did before being crushed by Drinol. As an Unggoy, he could earn no respect from Sangheili and it was better not to try.

Only an Unggoy could ever trust an Unggoy, he thought. He remembered Gedeg, how he had once feared him based on a rumor only to later become convinced that he was in fact 'blessed.' _But no,_ he realized the flaw in his thinking, _He believed the Unggoy rumor, and was only convinced otherwise when I said the _Arbiter _had spared me._ Even among Unggoy, it took a Sangheili's word over an Unggoy's.

As he mused this over, the doors opened and Jahnsen entered carrying a long Human weapon he recognized as a 'shotgun.' Jitji jumped up with alarm at this sight, but the Human set his weapon on a nearby table as he bent to inspect the occupent of a sealed medical chamber: a purple cylinder large enough to hold a Sangheili, filled with healing mist. "How is she?" the Human asked in English.

"Her condition has improved after we placed her into the medical chamber," 'Ruukulee answered, walking over to him. "However, our knowledge of human anatomy is incomplete. She will likely die."

"God damn it," Jahnsen cried, slamming his fist into the table.

Jitji was surprised by the phrase refering to a single god, but remembered what he had been told of their strange religion. _"They have no belief in gods?" he had questioned his brothers and sisters. The seven unit-long sermon had been interrupted when the Prophet of Honor chose to end his fast that night. They had taken advantage of the pause to trade stories about alien races, when Kipik had brought up the Humans. _

_None," Kipik answered, using a rare pronoun that emphasized absolute astonishment. "None at all!" _

_Well, they do have fake god," Romromi put in. "But none ever saw

him, and he left no artifacts, and he only speak with Human prophets now dead. Humans believe only from fake prophet text!" _

_"I hear," Tuput added, "That Human god gives stupid rules about what food they eat, what wear, how mate!" _

_They laughed joyfully, until Kipik shushed them for fear of the Sangheili taking notice. _

"Human god stupid, but we know better," Jitji said. "Quick, before Honor returns, let's get drink at nipple!"

Jitji smiled at the memory. That was when times were good, when they had simply cleaned the temple and gossiped over Milk. He wondered what had become of his family, and his smile faded as he imagined them dead, their skulls penetrated by Human bullets.

He turned to glare at Jahnsen, but instead felt a burst of sympathy. Just as he dreaded his own family's death, Jahnsen gazed upon his wounded comrade with concern for her failing life. _The Humansâ€| are not enemies,_ he decided. _Not unless we force them to be._

Their religion may be absurd, butâ€| the Prophet of Truth could very well be a traitor. _It would not do for I to declare their society sinful when our own drips with deceit._ He could no longer support the Covenant under the confidence that he was following the Gods. _And maybe that means that the Arbiter is rightâ€|_

The door opened once more, and Jitji quickly stood at attention as he saw who it was.

Emperor Kagu 'Lafatee had been cast from his own control center, declared incapable of commanding his vessel. What was worse, he feared 'Setfethee had been correct to do so. He had not commanded a military unit for nearly fifty cycles, practically an _age_ since he was last required to make tactical decisions.

As a High Councilor, he could make laws that would affect the many trillions of the Covenant. It was a position people would murder for â€" and he was sure some had â€" and yet it had made him weak. The Jiralhanae did not care about his status when they imprisoned him and threatened to doâ€| _things_ to him.

He was being forced back into a world that would judge him only on his military prowess, with little more than a glance at his helmet. He had to show his superiority once more, to prevent 'Setfethee from completely taking over. If he could not command a ship, he would need to prove himself in another way.

And so, after hearing the Ship Master order the Human to the medical center, he decided he would also make an appearance. He would assert his dominance before this Jahnsen, making it certain it was he who carried the power to take lives away. He knew the Arbiter had become found of the Human, and so he decided to begin his display with Jahnsen before moving on to the Arbiter and finally 'Setfethee.

He stepped inside the medical center and inwardly smiled as all former members of the Covenant straightened respectfully. Jahnsen,

who had his attention focused on the injured Keezz within a medical chamber, barely glanced up as he approached. "Jahnsen," he said to attract his attention. "I have been informed that the traitor who organized an attack on both the Arbiter and your commander is inside this room." He turned his gaze onto 'Opskitee, and let Jahnsen's eyes follow.

The treacherous Sangheili began to laugh as he approached, "Honestly, High Councilor, you give me far too great merit for my actions. I merely informed your warriors of the truth you kept from them, it was their decision to halt the flow of corruption."

"Enough talk," Jahnsen said suddenly. "You fry this bastard, 'Laflitee!"

'Opskitee grinned at the Human's mispronunciation of his name. "Yes, 'Laflitee, kill the traitor! I speak, of course, of the Unggoy two units to my left. This damnable creature slew several of its own people simply to cure its own hunger, and nearly killed a Sangheili! I, however, acted only with the noble purpose of reuniting the Covenant. I accept that my thinking was flawed when I attempted to trust the Jiralhanae â€" surely their blood is as damned as the Quelni's wasâ€" but know that your greatest enemy is not I."

"Excellency," the Unggoy of which he spoke began to speak, "Meâ€"

"Quiet, Jitji," he snapped, keeping his eyes on 'Opskitee. "Reuniting the Covenantâ€" would mean death to us all. The Prophetsâ€" _are_ our enemies. If the Unggoy had not been captured, perhaps it would have killed half our forcesâ€" Jitji whimpered. "But should _you_ have succeeded, your entire race could have been dead within the unit. No, I see the real enemy before me."

"You know, as I was escorted out of the holding pens," 'Opskitee began in a harsh, mocking tone, "I saw an empty cell with its wall up. No prisoner inside, and yet its energy barrier was functioning, a waste of power when you should be focusing on keeping the Jiralhanae contained. You should go now and fix the problem. After all, if you send the Unggoy it may kill everyone it encountersâ€" He broke off as he found his throat suddenly being squeezed tightly.

"Enough words," he said, echoing Jahnsen's earlier comment. He seized the Sangheili's head and forced it back, feeling the neck bone sharply snap. "Have the body prepared for consumption," he ordered the healer as he stepped away from the corpse.

"Consumption?" Jahnsen asked with disgust. "You're gonna _eat_ that?"

"The traitor failed to serve us in life, but his body can serve us in death," he explained. "The barest form of redemption offered by the damned."

"Huh, no thanks," Jahnsen replied, holding out his hands as if to ward away the notion. "I prefer to not have _met_ my dinner."

"Very well," he acknowledged, wondering briefly how Humans kept from

starving on the battlefield if they did not feed on their fallen. "I must leave now toâ€¦" He trailed off as the ship shuddered with an impact. _So it has come to hostilities after allâ€¦_ He thought grimly, wondering if they _should_ have charged the lasers.

"All personel, prepare for immediate transfer onto docked ship," 'Setfethee's voice boomed through the internal radio and into their ears.

Transfer? _'Setfethee has directly attached the Zealous Missionary to 'Vadumee's ship?_ It was a bizarre event, one that seemed without cause until he remembered 'Vadumee's paranoia. The few airlocks would allow him to carefully examine everything that entered his ship to a degree impossible with standard dropships. "You heard my Ship Master, healer," he said after a moment. "Prepare the wounded for transfer."

He stepped outside the small room and began walking, unsure where he was going. Eventually, he found himself inside the holding pen in which 'Opskitee had been kept. The mangled body of a Jiralhanae lay on the floor, torn apart by fuel rod, and as the traitor had indicated one cell was activated for no apparent reason.

He sighed and leaned against the wall. _Not the best preformance, I'm afraid._ He had gone over to the traitor, let him rant, and then killed him. He had made no expert speech befitting a High Councilor to assert his superiority, and in fact allowed his judgement regarding Jitji to be called into question.

He wondered if he should have had the Unggoy slain, if nothing more than as a political move. _All is not lost,_ he decided. _I now have Gedeg's superior Unggoy because of the Arbiter's act of mercy. When we reach Ascension, our chances of defeating the High Prophet of Truth will be that much stronger._ â€¦If such a thing was even possible.

He swallowed as he thought about what making war on _Ascension_ would entail. None had ever managed to so much as scratch it since it was uncovered on Ardhi so many ages past. They would have to board it and assault its crew from within, facing legions of warriors, to say nothing about the ancient magic only Prophets understood!

He shook his head. _I shall worry about that when I must and no sooner._ For now he had to make sure 'Setfethee would not take over. Although unsure why he was bothering at all, he walked over and tapped the control to disable the cell barrier.

As soon as the wall vanished, an awful smell met his nostrils and he fanned a hand over his face. "Gods, these Jiralhanae are rank," he spat, walking away from the corpse with disgust.

"Emperor 'Lafatee, please join us on the bridge," 'Setfethee's voice spoke in his ears, devoid of any apology.

Fuming, he sent a response, "Very well, Ship Master, if you deem it necessary." _I have proven myself to the Human, and the Arbiter shall be next._ He strode toward the control center, unaware of the small creature making its way through the Jiralhanae corpse.

For security purposes, the _Enlightened Soul_ had insisted that they use but one door between their ships. Major Hinha 'Samoree was first to set foot on the _Enlightened Soul_. The five Minors behind him carried what the Arbiter believed the crewmembers of the allied ship would care most about: weapons. Specifically, the spike weapons carried by the higher ranking Jiralhanae of the _Zealous Missionary_.

While no larger than the standard rifle, azure or crimson, these unfamiliar carbines proved far too heavy to be wielded by any Unggoy and had to be brought by his own Sangheili. Not that any of them minded the honor this would give them. Indeed, while he much preferred to earn respect through slaying Humans, he felt a burst of pride that his warriors would carry the enemy weapons.

After the airlocks opened, they walked along the curved pathway that would adjust for their differences in gravity generation. They encountered that always disturbing moment when up became down and down became up, but passed it without pause. Finally, they entered the allied ship, and displayed their gifts proudlyâ€¦ only to stare.

The Sangheili who had arrived to greet them, a Major, had lost a leg. All below the first knee of his right leg had been torn off. This would be shocking in its self, were it not for the fact that this Major was suspended above the ground through use of a Prophet's gravity belt. Behind him was the familiar sight of violent carnage, Jiralhanae bodies strewn about everywhere.

"Welcome aboard," the Sangheili greeted them. "I am Neap 'Lemosee. Apologies for the mess. I am afraid all of our Unggoy were slain in battle."

"No trouble at all," he smiled nervously, unsure how to react. "Allow us to provide you with the latest weapons created by the Jiralhanae, Major." His Minors hesitantly held out the rifles for Major 'Lemosee to examine.

"Yes, yes," 'Lemosee muttered, an intense look in his eyes. "Justice, yes? â€¦ Have them deposited in the control center, it is as much our armory as we have yet created."

He nodded to his Minors, and they hurried to obey. "Why not simply use the facilities onboard for their intended purpose?" he asked 'Lemosee as he tried not to stare at the belt.

"Many of these facilities areâ€¦ out of reach," 'Lemosee explained. "When we attacked the vessel, we were not so great in number that we could slay all of the Jiralhanae onboard. Commander 'Vadumee had us attack the control center directly, and then sealed off all corridors in which Jiralhanae walked."

He nodded in understanding. "Indeed. I believe the Arbiter took back the _Zealous Missionary_ through similar means. However, he has had us systematically kill each Jiralhanae he trappedâ€¦" Despite his efforts, his gaze returned to the gravity belt. These were worn only by the Prophets, and he saw no reason that this 'Lemosee should have the honor to wear one.

"Ah, yes, the gravity belt," 'Lemosee said, looking down at it himself. "As you can see, I am unable to preform my duties in my current condition. After the Prophet's death, I saw no reason not to take advantage of his very useful belt. Now I am able to preformâ€| at least some of my duties."

"The Jiralhanae slew a Prophet?" he asked, barely managing to keep his temper in check.

"No," 'Lemosee shook his head. "It was I who laid the blow upon the ironically named Prophet of Loyalty. Despite their pledge to include us on the Great Journey, the Prophet claimed that the Jiralhanae were to be their new servants and that Sangheili should accept their fate. We _did not_. We slew the Prophet and his servants!"

He stared at the Major, trying not to let the shock he felt slip into his expression. _This warrior is a traitor! We are boarding a ship held by traitors._ His story of the Prophet's betrayal was all lies of course, a trick to turn them all into heretics. He then remembered the Special Operations Officer's words of the Arbiter being corrupted by the Humans he brought with him. _Does the Arbiter partake in this treachery?_ He had to learn. "If what you speak is true, then you have indeed preformed us a grand service. You should inform the Arbiter at once so he mayâ€| take the appropriate procedures."

"The Arbiter and Commander 'Vadumee have discussed tactics," 'Lemosee informed him. "I believe they intend to attack _Ascension_ â€" it launched less than a unit past."

By the Prophetsâ€| It seemed that the horrible story was true. _The Arbiter has been enchanted!_ "We should procede with the transfer," he said, swallowing. He faced such grand opponents, but he had to try something. _Slay the Humans, and save the Arbiter from sin,_ he told himself. _Save the Arbiter and all who follow their oaths._

"Hm. Well, thanksâ€| I guess," Avery Johnson said, unsure how to respond. He had spent the past twenty-seven years doing his damndest to help eradicate the Covenant menace from the galaxy, and now here he was receiving a commendation from the bastard that killed Reach.

It seemed that the Hulk creature he had wounded was finished off by the Grunt traitor, and they were both being awarded for their service. How? Through the age-old Covenant practice of assimilation. The Arbiter had taken the word 'Sergeant' from his rank of Sergeant Major and had created a new Covenant rank specifically for the Grunt, giving it way more power than it deserved. His award was just to be the one from which the title came; apparently this was a great honor in their culture.

Great, he sighed. _Just what I want._ One thing was definitely good news: the Grunt traitor had taken a fatal dose of radiation and would be dead within the next day (or so; he found the Covenant calendar confusing). The sonofabitch Grunt would suffer before it went to wherever aliens were sent. He knew very well just how painful the effects of radiation poisoning could be, having had a bad incident himself back on Paris IV.

He turned to inspect his Commander's still body once more. The Elites had placed her inside what appeared to be the Covie version of a cryo-chamber, a purple tube filled with pink mist. Her uniform had been removed and Johnson could see a large gash, partially patched up from some organic substance, spanning the length of her torso.

He grabbed the shotgun he had left on a table and cocked it. It seemed that even though the Brutes had collected human supplies, the Elites would still rather die than even touch the stuff. The Grunts had all but forced the weapons on him and he picked out a M90 still in good condition, ammo, and some rations. "Alright, let's go," he said, letting the Elites lead the way. Behind him, the Elite medic carried his commander within the tube, and around them floated Forerunner drones.

They walked through countless corridors, each indistinguishable except for the Brute and Jackal corpses that decorated the floor (and in some cases, the walls). At last, they reached the airlock. Outside, numerous Covies paced around. Several Grunts gathered to watch as they passed.

"See? Human Sergeant," one coughed to its friend. "Who Jitji has." The second Grunt apparently understood the incomplete sentence and nodded.

God help me, he lamented. _I'm being regarded as famous by Grunts._ They paused as the Elites opened the door, just enough time for the Elite medic to explode. That is, as they stood there a Brute grenade was fired at his injured commander, only to bounce off the tube and hit the Elite.

The drones went into action immediately, firing beams of heat at the Elite who had attacked. The Elite dove into the crowd, letting himself be shielded by the unfortunate Covies that found themselves caught in the beams. As the drones moved away to reach a better angle, Johnson turned around sharply hearing the sound of an energy sword being engaged.

A red Elite, wielding the deadly sword, roared and charged him. He heard his bodyguards engage their swords, but knew there was not enough time. He raised the M90 and fired, causing blue light to flash around the Elite as it swung its double-bladed sword toward him. He dropped into a roll, dodging the sword and spinning around behind the Elite. His two friendly Elites had their swords out, ready to finish off his attacker; he fired.

The Elite fell to the floor, screaming something his implants translated as _Devil_. The drones, having killed the other one, returned to hover around him. "Heh," he chuckled. "Looks like your Sentinels aren't exactly the smartest drones in the galaxy, are they?"

"They areâ€¦ alien," one of his friendlies attempted to explain. "We are still unfamiliar with their fuctions."

Something you should have thought about before trusting them with my life, he mentally grumbled, but held his tongue to prevent the Elites from being insulted. _When trusting them to take a bullet for you if need be, it costs nothing to be polite._ Not that he exactly

needed them, as shown by this little demonstration.

"Let this be a warning to all," the Elite called out. "Attempting to harm the humans will only bring death and dishonor!"

Commander Rtas 'Vadumee ran his hands along the spike rifle, examining the shining black double barrels. "I have seen this before," he muttered. "The Prophet of Justice did not create itâ€¦ he has merely taken the credit." He remembered well that first meeting with High Chieftain Demon, the array of wicked tools that littered his belt, the vulgar weapons carried by his warriors. _The young Jiralhanae have forgotten what was once theirs, their heritage vanished by the High Councilâ€¦_

He turned to regard the Sangheili who he had welcomed aboard his stolen ship: the Arbiter, Ship Master 'Setfethee, and High Councilor 'Lafatee (who currently fancied himself an Emperor of Sangheili). They had gathered in the control center, all eager to launch an attack upon _Ascension_ itself â€" no small feat by any means. All the while, the Flood were making their attack on the Holy City, gaining millions of troops for their own armies. And then there was the matter of the Humansâ€¦

"Another attack on your Humans has been reported," he informed them, having received the message as he was examining the weapons. "The rebels were slain, and your Humans are unharmed."

'Lafatee growled. "The frequency of these insurrections is becoming most annoyingâ€¦"

"Well, then, Emperor," 'Setfethee spoke, the disdain in his voice unmistakable, "Perhaps you would be willing to consider my preposal to inform our warriors exactly what is occurring?"

"No," 'Lafatee said shortly. "That we have kept the truth from them this long is the only reason we still yet live. Were they to learn of our rebellionâ€¦"

"Would you prefer they learned now or when they are told that they must assault the Prophet of Truth?" 'Setfethee cut him off. "Tell them now, give them time to think over the factsâ€¦"

"And have our Humans slain, negating our chances of forming an alligence!" 'Lafatee cried, stabbing a finger at the Ship Master. "No, their ignorance is the only thing that keeps them from organizing against us. 'Opskitee was a mistake we must learn from. Now, the Prophets excelled through their use of fantasy and we should learn from their example."

"Their example is the reason we're trying to kill them," 'Setfethee retorted.

"Excellencies, if I may intrude?" he broke into their argument. "Ship Master 'Iewasee of the _Silent Blessing_ has elected to enter High Charity in order to help this Cortana. However, there _is_ another option available to us. If High Charity has been invaded by Flood, if their attacks have become so great that this construct should ask us for assistance, then perhaps we should consider it an enemy

stronghold to be destroyed."

"By the gods in the Divine Realms," 'Lafatee cried, his mandibles spread wide, "This goes beyond the matters of war and rebellion. High Charity is our home! Our sanctuary! You wish to destroy a place with such history?"

"It is our home no longer," 'Setfethee practically growled. He turned to 'Vadumee, "Do you know of a way to destroy it?"

"I do," he nodded his head. "By detonating the engines of any of our cruisers, we would create an explosion so severe as to utterly remove it from existence. I propose that we go alongside Silent Blessing and acquire the construct for ourselves. Unlike the Humans we carry, the construct will not be easily slain and may help us establish an alliance."

"Indeed?" 'Lafatee asked, interest overcoming his distaste. "Yes, this construct could take the form of a High Prophet. If we can make it broadcast an announcement that the Humans are under the protection of the High Prophet of Mercy, the attacks will drop away to nothing."

'Setfethee sighed, "While useful for a short term, it would still not be enough to convince anyone to attack the Prophet of Truth. How can we expect them to react when they find they have been deceived?"

"Regardless," he interrupted, aware that their dispute could waste them valuable time. "Are we in agreement that acquiring Cortana is in our best interests?"

"It will serve us well," 'Lafatee stated, glaring at 'Setfethee.

"Indeed," the Ship Master replied, returning the gaze.

The Arbiter remained silent, although he could tell that there was something on his mind.

"Well, then, if there are no objections," he paused to give the Arbiter a chance to speak but there was no response, "â€|Let us commence."

Within the halls of the Zealous Missionary, the final stage of transfer to the Enlightened Soul was about to commence: prisoner transfer. It was a duty that made Minor Onwi 'Ogoaree more than a little nervous, especially because this prisoner was a high-ranking Jiralhanae. He was sure that were this prisoner to break free of its restraints, the two Unggoy beside him would be of no help.

Careful to keep the Jiralhanae within his line of sight, he stepped behind it and raised his rifle. "Begin walking," he commanded.

"But of course," it responded, shuffling forward as best as it could with its legs linked together.

The Unggoy yelped and huddled behind him. No help at all, he

thought, but then something very unusual occurred.

"No, you strong Unggoy," he heard one say.

"Yesâ€¦ me strong," the other agreed. Soon the Unggoy took their proper places on each side of the prisoner.

How very odd, he thought, but was not going to deny a god's blessing. The prisoner also took interest in the Unggoy, but continued its slow march.

"Wait!" one Unggoy (the 'strong Unggoy') cried without warning, raising its pistol.

"What is it?" he asked, halting the prisoner. "Kig-Yar?" It was possible that they had missed one of the original crew.

"No, itâ€¦" the Unggoy trailed off, its eyes gazing stupidly at the ceiling. "Me hearâ€¦"

"What?" he asked, impatient.

"Skitter, skitter," the Unggoy said unintellegently. "Scratchy, scratchy."

"Enough nonsense," he ordered. "Prisoner, resume walking." They went back to their duties.

"Me heard somethingâ€¦" he heard the Unggoy whisper.

"Me knowâ€¦" he heard the other one answer.

Stupid Unggoy. He could barely wait to be a Major. Then he could lead people of actual intellegence as opposed to worthless cannon fodder. He blinked as he saw a quick movement out of the corner of his eye. He refused to take his eyes off of the prisoner and instead glanced at his motion detector. No hostiles were detected. _It is a mere trick of the light,_ he decided.

The flat nothingness of the Shadow World exploded into geometric shapes as they reentered the Moral Realms. The Arbiter gazed at the holograms, recognizing that they were inside High Charity. As Cortana had indicated, he could tell from the flashes of plasma that battles were taking place all over the Holy City.

"It appears we are the only ships inside the shell," 'Setfethee reported. He brought up a scan and frowned. "This isâ€¦ _very_ queer. Battles seem to be erupting in every sector, yet I am only reading life signs within the lower regionsâ€¦"

They stared at the display, nervously attempting to understand the implications of it.

"Do not underestimate the Parasite," 'Vadumee warned them, his eyes narrowing. "It is as insidious as it is foul. This could all be a deception to grant them a ship that can penetrate shadow."

"What of Cortana?" he asked. "The Flood can not infest what does not

have a form."

"We do not know enough about the construct," 'Vadumee pointed out. "Perhaps it has been taken and altered by the Flood, by this _Gravemind_â€|"

"Enough," 'Lafatee interrupted. "Arbiter, you will take a Phantom to the Fourth Tower, you will secure the Cortana, and you will take it back to the _Enlightened Soul_."

"Yes, Emperor," he responded, brought back into reality. He was not a ruler, he was but an Arbiter. He would let the Emperor strategize on his own, with the advice of the Ship Master. He would obey his commander as any dutiful warrior wouldâ€| but first he would pay a visit to the medical center.

"No, no, it's _not_ the product of a mental illness!" Avery Johnson cried. Of all the cultural things that were labeled as hardest to explain to an offworlder, he doubted that flip music would be one of them. And yet, here we was, trying to explain it to an alien whose race had never invented rock and roll.

"But if the volume is high enough to create damage to the auditory functionsâ€|" Peer Sticky trailed off as the Arbiter entered the room, and quickly stood at attention.

The Arbiter ignored his fellow Elite and approached him. He then shortly bowed in a manner similar to Asian cultures and said, "Sergeant Johnson, I wish to apologize for all the trouble you have been put through," the Elite said slowly. "I have been sent to retrieve a human construct from within a Flood-infested structure that may help us to cease these acts of rebellion, however, I fear I shall not be successful. If I am not, please convey my deepest apology to the humans of Earth. Would I have known the truth, I would have become a traitor long before Halo."

"Huh," he grunted, unsure how to reply. The bastard responsible for the fall of Reach and God knows how many other planets was apologizing to him? What the hell _could_ he say? _Words are overrated._ He grabbed the M90 and cocked it, "I'm in. You can leave your message with the oracle." He nodded at the Monitor guarding Keyes.

"I would be happy to be of service," the lightbulb chirped.

"No, Johnson," the Arbiter denied, shaking his head. "If both you and your commander perish, we may lose our ability to forge a treaty with your people."

"Don't worry about me," he said with a grin. "I've fought Flood before. They didn't find my taste as desirable as you'd think. Worry about your own men. I can take care of my own self."

The Arbiter stared at him for a long moment. "Very well," he said finally. "However, I shall instruct Peer Sticky to assist you."

"Yes, Arbiter," the red Elite replied, sounding far more enthusiastic

than last time they were to work together.

"Oracle?" the Arbiter asked, stepping close to the machine.

"Your message has been recorded," the Monitor replied.

"No," the Elite shook his head. "I have another task for you. I require the Index."

"I'm sorry," the Monitor said, "But only a Reclaimer has the authorityâ€"

"Give it to him, Sparky," Johnson interrupted. He watched as the Monitor produced the Index from its eye beam. _I gotta ask it how that trick works._

The Arbiter accepted the Forerunner device and bowed in thanks. "Are you ready?" he asked him.

Johnson grinned and raised his shotgun. "Lets send them on a first-class one-way trip to Hell!"

The Arbiter nodded, although Sticky looked confused. "Jitji?" the Arbiter called, and the Grunt traitor scurried over from another part of the sickbay.

"Yes, Arbiter, me ready," the Grunt answered before it had been given any instruction.

"Then let us go," the Arbiter said, leading them all out. He then made some order on his radio for some Elites to join them.

Soon enough, Johnson found himself inside a loaded Phantom. "So, what's this human device you're going after?" he asked the Arbiter as he felt the Phantom launch.

"It refers to itself as an artificial intellence construct known as Cortana," the Arbiter explained. The Elite paused as Johnson gave him a look of surprise, "You know of it?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Cortana's our top AI, the Master Chief'sâ€| partner, you could say."

"So it had indicated," the Arbiter said. "Cortana instructed us to help it by engaging an unused power source it could gain energy from, however, my orders are to take it back to the _Enlightened Soul_ so that weâ€|" he broke off.

"What?" he probed.

"â€|The exact use of Cortana is under debate," the Arbiter said finally. "The Emperor wishes to use Cortana to deceive our warriors, while Setfethy argues against itâ€| It is not my place."

He nodded, and the trip was silent for while.

"â€|What is Hell?" Peer Sticky asked after a few moments had passed. "Is it your afterlife, human?"

"Uh, yeah," he muttered, shifting back into educator mode. "But you

only go there if you're bad. It's a firey cavern where you get tortured for all eternity. If you're good, you get to go to Heaven where you can laze about on white puffy clouds without a careâ€¦ What's yours like?" he asked out of curiosity.

"After we perish, we are judged by the Forerunners," Sticky explained. "Similar to your beliefs, we are then sent to either the Mortal Realms or the Sea of Shadow. If we are deemed worthy in the eyes of our gods we are sent to regain new form, and we continue to serve the Prophets as they search for the Sacred Rings. If we are not worthy, we are sent to the Shadow World where we eternally drown in an endless darkness, without a glimmer of hope. It is often said the Prophet of Benevolence regularly takes his ship into the Shadow World simply to taunt the souls with that which they cannot have: the ability to leave."

"That a fact?" he laughed. _Who believes in a literal Hell these days?_ The aliens were always confusing, but at least now they were somewhat amusing to listen to.

"You do not believe that the Prophet of Benevolence would do such a thing?" Sticky asked in confusion. "I believe it well within his character. I assume you are aware of the incident at Draco III?"

"I don't know your politics," he said, ignoring the question. "I just meantâ€¦ What is the evidence of this Sea of Shadow?"

"What do you mean?" Sticky asked, more confused than ever. "You deny its existence?"

"Yeah, I do," he said. "We, humans, don't really believe in Hell. It's just a metaphor for being kept separate from God."

"I can understand your skepticism," Sticky acknowledged. "However, I can assure you that the Shadow World is quite factual. I have passed through it many times myself, as you must have to arrive here. I have heard the humans describe it as 'Slipspace.' Do you know that name?"

"_Slipspace_?" he asked incredulously. "You guys think Slipspace is Hell?"

"No," he replied. "I know it to be the Shadow World."

As he thought about it, it did make some sense. The utter absence of anything surrounding a ship would indeed resemble a world devoid of light, especially if you were certain that such a world existed somewhere. _Besides, the Prophets probably did a little retconning once they found out about Slipspace._ If the Elites could frequently see substantial proof of their prophecies, it made the rest of it that easier to swallow. "Believe me," he said, "What we're going to face down there will be more of a Hell than Slipspace could ever be."

"Johnson," said the Arbiter this time, "Do you know anything about something called the 'gravemind'?"

"No," he shook his head. "What is that?"

"It was a word used by Cortana," the Arbiter explained slowly. "I

believe it was using it as a name to describe the Flood leader."

"That huge Flood thing you were talking about?"

The Arbiter nodded. "Iâ€¦ I am very curious about it. It pronounced us brothersâ€¦ I hope it will keep that vow."

"Unlikely," he said. "The Flood aren't the most friendly of species."

"Arbiter," the pilot's voice came through the speakers, _"There appears to be a human ship crashed inside the fourth tower."_

Human ship? _The Flood kamikaze'ed In Amber Clad? Keyes won't be happy about that._

"Is a landing impossible?" the Arbiter asked.

"No, I will be able to land on the very top, but you may encounter some difficulty descending."

"Do not worry," the Arbiter said with a trace of humor, "That part will be trivial."

The Arbiter led them through the ruins of High Charity. Each step filled him with worry. The once grand Tower was filled with the residue of a Flood infestation, the walls covered with living flesh. The very air was thick with their putrid spores, and every breathe he took made him want to regurgitate. None of this worried him.

What truly made him nervous was the fact that while every room contained great evidence of Flood infestation, there were no Flood to be seen. His motion tracker displayed no activity at all, and he checked it once more to be certain it functioned correctly; it did. He approached the first image generator that appeared to be functioning, and engaged it.

Before them, an indigo figure of a female Human flickered into existence. Geometric shapes scrolled through her features, and he recognized several of the Human scripts within her form. Her eyes passed over each of them, acknowledging their presence. "Arbiter, it is good you came," the construct spoke in English for Jahnsen's benefit. "The UNSC _In Amber Clad_ has penetrated the center of the Tower. While it is grounded, its engines remain functional. I can use them to generate the energy I need to continue to hold back the Flood. The UNSC security programs, however, have blocked my access. What I need is for you to attach a Covenant decryption deviceâ€¦"

"Wait, wait, hold on," Jahnsen interrupted. "You're a top-class military AI. Why don't you have the codes already?"

"Unfortunately, only the ship's commander has the authorization to carry out certain tasks," Cortana explained. "Or if you're questioning if my identity, I seem to recall you repeatedly referring to the _Unyielding Hierophant_ as the Uneven Elephant even after being corrected. Good enough for you?"

"Yeah, that's pretty good," Jahnsen admitted.

"It truly matters not whether or not you have the codes," the Arbiter said. "My orders are to transfer you to Enlightened Soul at once so we may together engage the Prophet of Truth in battle. The Silent Blessing will remain here and detonate its engines, creating an explosion so great to destroy the city."

"Hmm," Cortana considered. "It seems to me that sacrificing an entire ship of Sangheili will only make it harder for you to claim Ascension. Detonate In Amber Clad's engines, and you can take Silent Blessing along with you."

He considered. Cortana's proposal did seem sound. However, this whole meeting was very strange. Where were all the Flood? Why were there so many explosions if there were none that were uninfested? If Cortana has been altered by the Flood, why would they be interested in In Amber Clad's engines? "I should consult my superiors," he said, activating his long-distance radio.

Damn it. The communications barrier was still up. He fiddled with his settings, and created a graphical representation of the individual waves. As the Jiralhanae had said, each wave was decreasing in size. Watching the hazy forms on his display, he was reminded of the ancient hourglasses of the lower temples. Each wave sinks away like tiny grains of sand. When the hourglass runs out of sand, it marks an old hour. The waves constantly decreasedâ€¦ He decided that whatever he would choose to do, he would do it as fast as possible as to avoid whatever the waves may herald. "My commander is out of reach," he said, returning his gaze to the construct. "I will assist you."

"Excellent," Cortana smiled.

Soon enough, he found his unit breaking into the Holy Library of the Covenant. Perhaps their greatest treasure not left behind by the Forerunners, this small room contained all of Covenant knowledge. Thankfully, the room had been so carefully sealed that it offered an escape from the stench of Flood. It was mostly bare but for the library's display, a large steel bowl in the center of the room filled with water, and the two navigational pedestals on each side of the entrance. He knelt down beside the display and inserted his identity disk. However, it was rejected; it appeared that not even the Arbiter had authorization.

"Insert it in the map generator," Cortana's voice met their ears.

He stepped over to the short pedestal, and did as the construct instructed. Cortana's form soon appeared in place of the map.

"Try it again," Cortana told him. "I rewrote your identification. It now thinks you are the Prophet of Mercy."

How could this Human construct be so powerful? the Arbiter wondered, inserting the disk once more. This time he was given access and the display glowed a rich gold, a stark contrast to the dark green of the infested air, and an image of the Abiri was projected in the air before him. He followed Cortana's directions, downloading the

requested data.

"Great. Now, we need to board the In Amber Clad."

"Wait," he said, eying the library. "Did you not earlier say that you had full access to this database?"

"You caught me," Cortana admitted easily. "I lied in order to convince you to come. Now that you have, I see no reason to deceive you any further."

"Indeed," he muttered. _Unless you are lying with every word._ It was too late to turn back emptyhanded, but perhaps he could make some more use out of the library. He returned to the display and brought up the search index, and then requested all documents with the term '_Ascension_'.

He could only watch as hundreds of documents were sped through the display, each containing the word '_Ascension_' in the designation. From the glimpses he got of the contents, he could tell many of the documents contained information on the Shadow World. _This isâ€¦ the Great Journey,_ he realized. _Fake evidence to support their myth?_

He halted the cycle, and examined one of the files. "Divine Pathway Theory #293," he read aloud. "Author: Prophet of Virtue. For ages we have prophesied assuming the Luminous Key properly desciphered the Holy Text of Ascension; however, there is a possibility it had a flaw in its design, small enough to evade detection, but substantial enough to defile our predictions. Below I have gathered possible alternativesâ€¦" He stopped reading. He opened another one, and read it with equal confusion. These files contained conjectures and opinions relating to the nature of the Great Journey, with no mention of the visions said to guide the Prophets to the truth. _Could the Prophets themselves have forgotten it was a myth?_

He began a new search for the term '_Ascension_', but bound it to the ship category this time. The numbers were considerably lesser than the more broad earlier search, and he quickly skipped through the documents. Most of them detailed the ship's discovery at the bottom of one of Ardhi's oceans, the ramifications it had on the Prophet-Sangheili war, and of course Prorok's famous speech. However, there were a few files on the Rite of Ascension, the ritual that supposedly allowed Hierarchs to become the reincarnation of the first Prophet, which was preformed in the heart of _Ascension_.

He accessed the files and browsed through them. His breath stopped short as he viewed an image of a Prophet's head being sawed apart by another Prophet, both dressed in the royal gowns of the Ages of Conflict. He read the caption: _Prorok sacrifices Nabi to create the Luminous Key. (artistic generation, Prophet of Faith)_

This isâ€¦ despicable, the Arbiter thought as he gazed at the horrifying image. Even knowing the Covenant mythology was false, this went against all he knew of it. "No, no," he mumbled. _Prorok sacrificed himself! Everybody knows that!_

As the story went, the Prophet saw the potential to become semi-immortal by binding his soul to _Ascension_, allowing his successors to view all of his knowledge and become his reincarnated

forms. He meditated on the Forerunner text for three days, refusing to eat or drink, until he finally knew what he must do. He plunged his sword in his brain, but the Forerunners kept him alive just long enough to craft the Luminous Key and then they let him die in service of the Covenant, allowing his soul to remain within the Key. It was a popular tale, one often dramatized by the youth.

"Hey, you gonna stare at this piece of sadomasochism all day?" Jahnsen broke him out of his stupor.

"No," he muttered, moving on. _Here it is,_ he thought with triumph as he brought up a three-dimensional map of _Ascension_'s interior. _This will be very useful._ He hurriedly downloaded it, and motioned for them to continue moving.

"Spin about!" Ship Master Enla 'Erforee cried as they were struck by a torpedo. While there was no true direction within empty space, relative to them the _Selfless_ was upsidedown. "Recharge the lasers! Broadcast our affiliation!" The confusion within this one battle had been enormous. Under the shadow of the communications barrier, it had been near impossible to be certain that they were in fact fighting the enemy. Fortunately, the barrier strength had waned considerably since it was first projected and they were now able to communicate with other ships.

"Excellency, _Selfless_ is Sangheili," Major 'Nugadee reported as the viewer depicted the cruiser veering away to fire on another ship. "Shall I fire torpedos?"

"Not yet!" he snapped. "Acquire the affiliation ofâ€|" he checked which ship _Selfless_ was attacking, "_Shining Light_. Now!" _Absolute maddness._ It was obvious that this was no way to fight a battle and while he strongly wished to avoid firing on an allied craft, the constant search for affiliation made his frigate vulnerable to enemy (and friendly) fire.

"Excellency, I am detecting excelerating power levels from High Charity," Major 'Rzaolee reported just as 'Nugadee announced that _Shining Light_ was under Jiralhanae command.

He chose to temporarily ignore High Charity, his eyes studying the viewer. "Fire two torpedos into her left flank! Are the lasers charged?!"

"Yes, Excellency!"

"Target the engines. Wait for shields to drop! 'Codomee, swing us around _Selfless_. I want to slay Jiralhanae, not defend _Selfless_, understand?"

"Yes, Excellency!"

"Good!" Free for an instant, he glanced at High Charity. As had been indicated, the energy levels had greatly increased in the past moment. In fact it seemed as though her engines were charging upâ€|

"Shadow penetration!" 'Rzaolee shouted as the displays blinked a

warning. "We will be swept up in her wake!"

"Torpedos have impacted!" 'Nugadee cried. "Firing lasers!"

His eyes quickly flicked back and forth from the viewer to the penetration stats. _The battle will be suspended when we are in the Shadow Worldâ€|_ "Cease fire! Keep us behind _Selfless_" He watched as _Shining Light_ was struck by _Selfless_'s turrets, and waited for penetration to occur.

However, instead of the usual effects of shadow penetration being displayed, it appeared that the machines were malfunctioning. _What in the name of Prorok is this?_ The viewer continued to display the placement of ships, impossible within the darkness of the Shadow World. Even the shadow readings, the radiation measures, were all incorrect for either world.

"Excellency, weâ€|" 'Rzaolee trailed off as he took in the readings.

"Are we in shadow?" Major 'Codomee wondered.

"Excellency, all weapons have beenâ€| _altered_" 'Nugadee declared in a shocked voice.

He was about to ask the Major to elaborate, but then saw it for himself. Every single torpedo, plasma stream, and laser within the battlefield had been removed from the realm of physics known to him, for they all flew throughout space without any direction he could make out. However, they all impacted into a ship before dispersing. He also noticed that the Sacred Ring had vanished. "What in the _universe_ is happening?!" he cried to the gods with all the strength his voice had.

"What. In. The Hell. Was that?" Jahnsen demanded.

They had finally made their way into the crashed Human ship and had established a link between the engines and High Charity's computer system, allowing Cortana to access what it needed to access. Then the Arbiter had watched as the power was transferred from the ship and into High Charity's power grid. They all had felt the city tremble as it penetrated shadow.

"We have entered Hell," 'Pirztikee answered, perhaps mistranslating the statement.

"Slipspace," he corrected. "We have entered Slipspaceâ€| Why?"

"Cortana?" Jahnsen asked. However, he received no response.

The Arbiter noticed that the communication barrier waves had vanished. "We should go," he muttered. _I have a very bad feeling about this._ Not that it was much of a variation from his normal line of thinking.

"Cortana? Is something wrong?" Jahnsen tried again to no avail.

"Let us go," he snapped. "The mission is a failure. Let us escape with our lives intact."

They made their way out of the Human ship and stepped out into the hole the impact had created. Several levels of the Tower lay open with various pieces of debris bridging the gaps. Fortunately, the Flood infestation had glued much of the debris to what they lay against, allowing them to use it to climb down to the ship. It had been very welcome when they had found it, but now the openness of the area bothered him. _No where to hide._

"Ascend," he ordered. "Now." His warriors began to climb. He engaged his radio and tried once more to contact the construct. "Cortana? Are you there?" Silence greeted him. It occurred to him that he could now theoretically contact _Enlightened Soul_. He was checking his radio, when behind him he heard an electronic chirp. He turned to see a door slide open, letting Flood spill into the room.

"Go!" he cried, firing red plasma into the swarm. He tightened his mandibles and decided to do his best to give his warriors time to escape, sacrificing himself if necessary. However, doors were opening all around them.

"Die!" Jitji screamed as he ran into a nearby swarm, but was soon overrun and activated what the Arbiter knew would be one last grenade before death. _So much for Sergeant Jitjiâ€¦|_

He followed in the Unggoy's lead and threw a grenade into the mass of Parasites, before hurrying up after his warriors. On the next level he saw that they were involved in their own battles, Flood all around them. He dropped his rifles and engaged his sword, slicing away at the creatures. _Too many, he knew.

_It was all for nothing, he realized. He, Jahnsen, 'Pirztikee, would all be slain here. He had failed to bring back Cortana, and now had killed their last healthy Human. The fate of the universe now rested on the shoulders of the creature the Covenant called Demon, this Spartan-117. Despite his disbelief, he began to silently pray. _My Gods, please look after himâ€¦|_ It would have to do, for he could do no more to help him.

17. Truth, Justice, and the Covenant Way

On the bridge of the _UNSC Ramesses II_, Fleet Admiral Magnus B. Harper bit his lip. During the two-week-long Covenant siege, the once grand Orbital Defence Grid of Earth had been thoroughly trounced. Few of the 200 Super MAC Stations remained, and more and more Covies got through to attack the planet below. It was not a stretch by any means to speculate that this would be the downfall of humanity, the End Times.

The one good thing about any of this was that the Covenant had yet to begin glassing. The only conclusion to be made was that there was something on Earth that they were after and while the Covenant would often delight in spilling their blood in personal, the great holes they dug in the earth led him to suspect they were after something far more spectacular. _Daniel's Tombâ€¦|_

He crossed himself without thinking. Of all the things he had learned

as a black-level operative of the Office of Naval Intelligence, the secret that lay beneath the earth was by far the most disturbing. He was not the most devout of men, but even he could see the similarity between the portents and the war. _International credits, peace on Earth, widespread lack of faithâ€¦|_

"We've got a new contact," Commander Hartmann suddenly shouted over the COM as an alien craft, unmistakably of the same architectural design as the Tomb, exited slipspace and flew directly into the battle cluster. "Unknown classification!"

"Run a scan on that ship," he barked to Lieutenant Rutten, even as Fleet Admiral Hood responded to destroy it.

Jesus H. Christâ€¦| If the Covenant had a ship that was built by the same people who made the Tombâ€¦| His mind raced with the possibilities. One thing was certain, however; the Covenant could not be allowed to make use of their advantage.

"Sir," Hartmann called, breaking him out of his thoughts. "Detecting only one UNSC transponder. Master Chief SPARTAN-117."

A SPARTAN-II? Perhaps there was still hope. "Send a status report to HighCom at once!"

"Yes, sir!"

_ "We've got a new contact! Unknown classification!"_ The distinctly human voice declared through an open COM channel, startling John out of his thoughts. _What in the world?_ Had the ship broken slipspace and arrived at Earth already? He'd never heard of a Covenant ship being anywhere near as fast. _Although, it is a Forerunner ship,_ he reminded himself.

He opened a COM channel and identified himself. "This is SPARTAN-117. Can anyone hear me? Over."

Almost instantly, Fleet Admiral Hood answered. _"Master Chief? You mind telling me what you're doing on that ship?"_

"Sir, finishing this fight," John declared. He didn't care what kind of forces the Covenant had collected inside this ship, he had seen too many good men fall victim to this struggle and he would be damned if he let the Prophet of Truth win the war. _I'll win,_ he smiled grimly to himself. _I always do._

_ "Glad to hear it, Chief."_ The strained voice of the Fleet Admiral broke him out of his thoughts. _"Report."_

There was so much to tell, but they were running out of time. He had to deliver a more compact version. "Sir, the last of the Covenant leaders is onboard this ship. Another fleet is on its way," he said, neglecting to mention anything about Cortana.

After a moment, the Fleet Admiral responded. _"Understood. Master Chief, take out the Prophet. I'll see if I can send you any support."_

"Yes, sir," John answered.

_"Out." _

He hefted his energy sword and started walking. Although he entered through the engine, there was a tunnel he could follow into what appeared to be a maintenance corridor. It didn't take long to find a connection to a main passageway. Smashing a glass window, he dropped down into a hallway reminiscent of those he had walked through on the first Halo. As soon as he landed, three Sentinels appeared in midair right in front of him.

Holograms, he realized. He supposed this was good news. If the Covenant depended on holograms to guard corridors, that meant their forces were stretched thin. John intended to take as much advantage of this as he could.

He moved to step through the holograms, but bumped into a real physical Sentinel body. It moved back slightly at the impact, and the other Sentinels turned to face him. _Real Sentinels?_ He raised his weapon defensively, but then remembered the way they had popped into reality. No, these were holograms with force fields and perhaps some basic intelligence.

A security system. He saw no advantage to attacking and perhaps sounding an alarm, so he quickly weaved his way through the drones and cautiously continued onward. The fake Sentinels continued to face in his direction, but remained at their posts.

After following the hall down its course, he encountered a crossroads. Numerous tunnels, all marked only with unfamiliar circular glyphs, each containing their own branches. It wasn't long before he got lost. Without Cortana in his head as a constant guide, he found himself wandering aimlessly. Fortunately he had, as of yet, encountered no Covenant.

"Demon!"

No record was perfect. He turned to face two Brutes armed with grenade launchers, dubbed 'Brute Shots' by Marines. He had no time to deactivate his energy sword, and so he charged the Brute nearest and grabbed a plasma grenade. The Brute fired; he dodged to the side and sliced the sword upwards, cutting it in two. The other Brute tried to turn to face him, but wasn't fast enough. He jumped behind its back and threw the grenade onto its head.

It was only a matter of time, a few seconds, enough time to run out of range. The explosion came, killing the Brute instantly. John hurried to the corpses and collected what he could, trading the nearly depleted carbine on his back for a Brute Shot. As he did, he went over his goodbyes to Cortana. She was more than just an AI, sheâ€|

I will win this war for you, he promised both her and everybody who had to be left behind. In the mean time, he had to navigate the labyrinthian ship on his own. _Without Cortana to guide meâ€| I'll just have to stop for directions, then,_ he supposed.

"So you understand your orders?" Chieftain Cronus questioned the Sangheili. Discomfort at taking orders from a Jiralhanae was evident on the shimmering blue image's features. _Good,_ he thought, grinning inwardly.

"Yes, Excellency," the Sangheili answered with tight jaws. Cronus terminated the connection with a laugh. Such a wonderful time this was, when arrogant Sangheili bowed to the mighty Jiralhanae!

The holographic generator beeped as an image of the High Prophet of Justice flickered into place. Unlike the previous image, this hologram was of excellent quality. Every color was presented just the way it should have been.

"My Lord," he exclaimed, dropping his eyes as was proper.

"Cronus," his master said smugly. "I trust that the Fleet Master has been properly instructed?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on, "It has come to my attention that the creature popularly known as the Demon has boarded this most holy vessel."

"The Demon?" he growled. "Fear not, my Lord, for this Demon shall not live to see the light of our ascension!"

"If it does, it will be anâ€¦ interesting event," his master said, a threat evident in his voice. "Do not fail me."

These were extraordinary times, when the Great Journey was nearly within their grasp. He had accepted his position under Truth with utmost delight, ignoring the cost, because he knew the honor he would receive in the Divine Realm. He had known as he swore his loyalty to the Hierarch, as he continued to do, that he would do whatever it took to achieve such ascensionâ€¦ even if it had meant a task to kill the Prophet of Justiceâ€¦ "I am your loyal servant, Eminence," he said, head bowed. The hologram vanished in a blink, and he hurried to the control center to carry out his orders.

The Demonâ€¦ It was incredible that it had managed to survive High Charity even as it was assaulted by Flood, and then to have found its way onboard _Ascension_â€¦ It was as if the creature did in fact possess the dark magics of which Minors spoke.

It was a ridiculous concept, to be sure. An educated Jiralhanae knew that only Prophets possessed magic because only their strength came from the gods. And yetâ€¦ This Demon, Master Chief, had not only survived the destruction of its planet but the explosion that had consumed the Sacred Ring. Now it had evaded even the Flood to begin assault on _Ascension_?

It is a parasite, he reasoned. _As dangerous as the Flood._ It would continue its rampage of destruction until it met its end. And Cronus was the one who would see to it! He swiped his battle scythe through the air menacingly.

"Jiralhanae!" He roared into the pit as he entered the control center. Unlike most ships of the Covenant, the _Ascension_'s control center was triangular in shape. A section covering two points containing navigation and weapon consoles had been dubbed 'the pit' due to the final point raised on a sharp wall taller than two Jiralhanae. At this level, the Ship Master could watch over the pit,

as well as view the large display which filled the far wall. Not that _Ascension_ had or needed a Ship Master, for the Hierarchy controlled it from within the chamber where the Luminous Key was housed.

"Yes, Chieftain?" his Jiralhanae answered, heads properly bowed.

"The Hierarchy have given us an assignment," he grinned. "May the finest warriors approach me now! Who among you has the courage, strength, and honor to slay the vile Demon that has set foot on _Ascension_?"

The numbers were as expected, and he gained several choice volunteers. "The Forerunners are with us now more than ever," he declared. "The only stain this Demon shall place on _Ascension_ will be from its impure blood!"

The High Prophet of Truth gazed at the intricate viewer, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Things were moving along as planned, the Sangheili ships breaking formation to secure the Ark. He reached out a delicate finger to gently stroke the hologram, guiding _Ascension_ down to one of the land masses on the planet.

"After ages," he spoke softly to the spirit of Prorok, whom he knew dwelt within the Luminous Key, an ancient artifact placed no more than seven units away from him, "Everything falls together. The Sangheili will perish, as you knew they would, while we enter the Divine Realm."

"As brothers," the voice of the Prophet of Justice spoke.

He glanced away from the viewer to regard the amusing image of the brash young Councilor in the throne and headress of a Hierarchy. After he had eliminated his brother Mercy, he could have simply boarded _Ascension_ alone and threatened the illusion his ancestors fought so hard to maintain. Fortunately, he had noticed the Prophet of Justice attempting to flee High Charity and had seen such marvelous potential in that figure. Why would he let the true power of the Covenant die with him when he could continue the First's legacy, Prorok would ask him?

"As brothers," he agreed, smiling.

A crystalline ball roughly the size of an ATV hung high in the air, pulsing with energy. Although apparently solid, its surface seemed to shift around as though it were a flowing liquid. John found it oddly pleasant to look at, and apparently so did a couple of Brutes.

"Magnificent is it not?" one of the Brutes commented.

"Indeed," its partner agreed. "This holy ship is truly the very embodiment of ascension."

"Still, I cannot help but question the decision made by the Prophet

of Justice," the first began, only to be interrupted.

"Quiet!" the second Brute hissed. "The very walls of this vessel are alive with the spirit of the First. Do not express your sinfulness!" It never got to finish its sentence, as John swept his Brute Shot bayonet through the back of its neck.

As the corpse dropped to the floor, he leaped to the side to avoid Brute Shot grenades. He charged the Brute, knocked the weapon out of its hands, and put an unengaged energy sword to its head. "Where is Truth?" he asked the alien coldly.

"Truth?" the Brute played dumb, "All truth is relative, Demon."

"No time for games," he said, stroking the hilt in preparation. "Where is he?"

"You must be speaking of the High Prophet of Truth, Hierarch of the Covenant," the Brute said, as though suddenly making the connection. "May I inquire as to your intent, Master Demon?" it asked sarcastically.

"My intent," he said, "Is to find Truth and kill him." He tensed, expecting the Brute to attempt to force its way out of his grip.

"I see," it said, cocking its head as if in thought. "The Hierarchs are within the deepest chamber. Continue down the corridor, turn left at the second turn, follow the Drone passages until you reach—" it continued to recite directions. John memorized the instructions even as he found himself confused that the Brute would obey so easily. His confusion must have translated into his movement, for the Brute then said, "I assure you that my navigation is neither deceitful nor incorrect."

"Why just betray your Prophet?" he asked doubtfully.

"Not all who desire ascension have willingly sworn their loyalty to the Covenant," the Brute replied. "Slay the Hierarchs and the Brute race will be as free as we once were."

A Brute rebel? It was not outside the realm of possibility. After all, the United Rebel Front had warred with the UNSC decades before the Covenant showed up. He examined the Brute's ape-like face for a moment, and then gave it a sharp headbutt to knock it unconscious. Having few choices, he would give it the benefit of the doubt.

He followed the Brute's directions, pausing when he came to the area the Brute had referred to as a 'Drone passage.' It was obvious where the name had come from, for the corridor he faced was utterly covered in a honeycomb-like waxy substance. He raised his weapon defensively and entered the passage.

It wasn't long before numerous hostiles appeared on his motion sensor. _Drones,_ he guessed with a sigh. Aware that the Brute was likely sending him into a trap, he cautiously moved forward.

Coming to a turn, he covertly looked around the corner. Instead of the normal set of corridors, this was a room large enough to hold three Scorpion tanks and it was filled with Drones. Drones marched in rows on the floor, walls, and he assumed the ceiling as well although

he couldn't tell from his angle.

He weighed his options. He could assume the Brute was lying and go back, or he could risk his life and his mission by attacking a Drone hive by himself. He primed a plasma grenade.

The narrow corridor proved to be an excellent chokepoint. After exciting the hive by tossing a grenade in, the Drones mindlessly rushed him. The Brute Shot, in combination with the sword, soon reduced their numbers to a manageable amount. Using a dropped plasma pistol, he quickly picked off the stragglers hiding on the ceiling.

Having emptied his Brute Shot, he set it on the side as he inspected the chamber. He suspected it could have had originally been an armory, but its weapons were long since removed from the shelves lining the walls. The only exit appeared to be behind a large buildup of wax.

He approached the bulbous structure, examined it, and then tore away at it with his hands. Without warning, an enormous insect burst out of the structure, throwing him across the room. He tumbled into a roll, then stood and activated the sword.

"Demon!" the giant insect screeched, raising itself onto its back legs to make itself appear even larger. "Slayer of my children!"

A queen, he realized. Perhaps this was the trap that the Brute had set for him. He reached for a grenade, but found his pouch empty. _Oh bugger,_ he thought with faint amusement.

With a battle cry, the Queen charged him. He dodged out of the way and slashed at her legs, causing her to stumble. Continuing to dance around her, he struck the legs until he removed enough for her to remain immobile.

"Beast! Demon!" The Queen screamed with agony, perhaps more at the death of the Drones than at her own injury. On her back, large and glassy wings began to flap, and she soon raised herself over a meter off the ground. "Die!" she screamed, mandibles gnashing, as she charged him once more.

He waited until she came close, and then jumped up high. He landed on the Queen's back, and then cut off her wings. She slammed to the ground with a groan, and he plunged the sword into her neck to end her pain. His shield shimmered as it recharged, and he left the sight of the dead hive behind him as he cut his way out.

From there, he returned to the Brute's directions, finding them accurate. Either the Brute was indeed a rebel, or it thought to enhance its lie by combining truth and fantasy. In any case, the directions were a useful guide.

Repeat: Covenant ship approaching Sydney. Requesting all available UNSC forces within range," the static-filled transmission reached his radio.

Sydney? John thought with a surge of tension. If Truth was attacking Sydney, he would bet anything the Prophet had set his sights on High Command. _More Forerunner artifacts,_ he supposed. It

made sense that Bravo-6 would house any artifacts ONI found, but he couldn't help but wonder if the facility was perhaps attached to an underground Forerunner structure in the same manner as CASTLE Base on Reach.

He dismissed his wild speculation to focus on his goal. Taking out Truth was all he needed to contemplate. Assuming the Brute's directions were authentic, he was perhaps two kilometers from Truth's location. Any value of surprise he had was probably gone by now, insuring heavy resistance between him and the Prophet. Blinking away another pang of regret at leaving Cortana behind, he quickened his pace.

"There can be no mistake, sir. The Tomb's doors have become unsealed."

Admiral Jordan Harel reviewed the report, his eyes dancing across the hologram. *_Covenant over our heads, and this happens?_* He sighed, bringing his hands up to rub his forehead. "Begin an immediate investigation of the facility's contents," he ordered the AI. "I want Fury TAC-nukes planted and tied into the Hive's failsafe protocol. None of those Covie bastards are gonna get their filthy hands on the greatest discovery of mankind!"

"Yes, sir. Units have been retasked."

He glanced quickly back at the report, rereading a certain paragraph. "You're sure that the Tomb is responding to the close proximity of the Covenant ship?"

The AI Fafnir, in the form of a heraldic dragon, sharply raised himself up on his back legs as though upset his intelligence was put into question. "Sir, I have a 93.2 probability of accuracy," he replied in a huff. "If you consider my analysis doubtful, sir, perhaps you would be interested in an image of the ship?" He held out his claws and an image soon appeared between them.

Harel's first thought was that the ship bore a resemblance to the Grand Tokyo Tower, if with a separate set of colors. Then he looked closer. "Bloody hell," he swore. The ship's build with its arrangement of parts and colors was extremely similar to the architectural design of the Tomb.

"Sir," Fafnir broke into his thoughts, "The ship is broadcasting a message, unencrypted, from the Prophet of Truth. Shall I play it through?"

He nodded an acknowledgement, and the dragon shimmered briefly before being replaced with what could only be a Prophet. The body was different than what he had expected of the Covenant leader; the neck was too long, the ears too dog-like, the eyes too large, the muscular structure too weak. All in all, it was a highly disappointing moment.

"Creatures of the Covenant," the Prophet began, his true voice replaced with an automatic English translation, "We stand now at the edge of the path, the Great Journey so very nearâ€¦"

"And yet the human infestation has spread even to these most holy of locations," the Prophet preached via a holographic generator. Covies of various sorts, mostly Brutes and Grunts crowded around it, hanging onto their leader's words. "They have gathered over the Blind Cartographer to nest, breed, and feed off of the holy aura as a keelbug feeds from the exudations of electrical facilities. They are vermin, to be exterminated where ever they are found."

He quietly assessed the situation and drew two plasma grenades. He carefully planted them on each side of the corridor, an eye on his enemies. However, the Covies remained oblivious, their eyes glued to the holo-cast.

"They know their fate," the Prophet went on. "I have intercepted numerous broadcasts of them praying to their fake god, begging him for a mercy that shall never be delivered. They weep and beg and mutilate themselves in futile hope, a desperation that has caused many of them to war amongst each other. Well, we offered them the eternal salvation they sought, offered them the prophecies of Prorok, and see now the fruits of their response!" The Prophet gave a haughty laugh. "Yes, their destruction is their own doing and we, servants of the true gods, shall offer them all the mercy they deserve!"

He raised the Brute flash grenade and aimed.

"Even now they aim their petty warships at ascension, practically begging for the destruction we will gift them. I say, let them come!"

A blazing light blasted from the far side of the group, causing them to jump back away from it, toward him and toward the plasma grenades. Before they could recover ("Ooh, very bright light!" a Grunt moaned), he tossed a plasma grenade onto the back of a Brute's head. He then ran backwards, firing from his Brute Shot. The resulting explosion was spectacular, killing them all and smashing the hologram generator.

"Nothing can stop" the Prophet could be heard saying before the transmission cut out.

Is that a challenge? He inwardly smiled as he collected discarded weapons. They were afraid. The tone taken by the endless propaganda was good evidence of that. The Flood had weakened them and now they were desperately trying to recover, pretending that their great city was not taken over at all, nor that the Elites were rebelling.

If there was some organized group of Brute rebels, there seemed no better time for them to strike. Perhaps they were waiting for him to assassinate Truth before making their move. Either way, victory seemed right around the corner.

"Good show, Demon!"

He snapped up, Brute Shot ready, but saw no apparent enemy to engage. Then he realized that a Prophet image had returned above the generator, but it wasn't Truth. This Prophet was a youthful-looking chocolate brown color, and was staring directly at him.

"I've long since grown tired of that old bastard's speeches," the Prophet said, clearly speaking to him. "I can quite understand your wish to silence him."

He glanced at the holographic generator; it looked smashed beyond repair. He looked back at the Prophet. "You have the opportunity to surrender," he said bluntly, ignoring the conversation.

"Surrender?" the Prophet asked, sounding as though the term was utterly alien to him, before collapsing into giggles. "Oh, I shall like you. Cronus come to see you yet?"

"Cronus?" he asked. Despite his annoyance, he was curious about the threat.

"My prize Brute," the Prophet explained. "He was gifted a powerful weapon pieced together by theâ€¦ it was Forerunner originally. But how rude of me not to introduce myself! I am the Prophet of Justice, soon to be the last Prophet of Truth! And you are?"

He responded to the rather ridiculous question by slamming the bayonet into the generator. This time, the hologram vanished for good. He had wasted enough time sitting and waiting for the Covenant, perhaps this Cronus, to hunt him down.

However, he had learned valuable intel. This Prophet, the Prophet of Justice, was some sort of heir of the Prophet of Truth, and apparently conspiring to kill him. John now had two targets. _It is never as easy as it first appears._

He started moving when a light tremble spread through the ship. Struck by a MAC cannon? He hurried through the maze of corridors, depending on the accuracy of a smart-aleck Brute's directions.

A crackled message came into his radio: a human voice swearing loudly about the presence of the Covenant ship. Either the ship had landed, he reasoned, or it had caused some kind of damage. _Sydney has to be the safest place on the planet,_ he thought. _Of all the cities for them to attack, this would be the easiest to defend._

"Demon!"

He looked up to see a Brute standing motionlessly on a ledge above and behind him, dressed in the sleek blue armor found on so many Brutes on this ship. The Brute's still form had allowed it to remain off his sensor's detection.

John brought his Brute Shot up to fire, but the Brute tossed down a stick grenade. Not the relatively harmless flash bomb, but the deadly fragmentation grenade that blasted white-hot metal spikes. He leaped over it, not quite high enough to reach the ledge, but then swung the bayonet into the Brute and gutted it just before the blade struck the metal floor. Hanging from the ledge by the Brute Shot, he managed to avoid the funnel of spikes that shot from the grenade.

A sudden blip on his motion sensor warned him of an enemy moving toward him fast from the direction he was facing. He saw no Covie coming on the ledge, and quickly pulled himself up. He was not a second too late, for a large hammer swept through the area he had been hanging just moments before.

He looked down to see a Brute wearing a red suit of armor vaguely reminiscent of that worn by the samurai of 19th century Japan. The Brute looked up at him and growled. He responded by fishing out a spike grenade from the dead Brute's belt, and throwing it down to its friend.

He then found himself backpedalling as the Brute threw its hammer aside and leaped onto the ledge itself. "Canned meat!" the Brute growled, lumbering towards him.

He jumped over the Brute's head, spun and slammed the bayonet into the back of its neck. The Brute let out a yell, and then fell into a crumpled heap. He flipped the Brute Shot onto his back and leaned down to scavenge the corpse, but found himself jumping back down as a large metal blade swept through the air where he had previously been just moments before.

He looked up to see a very large white-haired Brute wielding a wicked-looking scythe. The Covie's choice of weapon, coupled with its pale fur, reminded John of the personification of Death. Unlike the Grim Reaper of legend, however, John was certain this Brute would not settle for a mere chess match. "Don't make me chase you," the Brute taunted. "I will make your death slow and painful."

"Cronus?" he questioned, remembering the Prophet of Justice. He glanced at the powerful-looking scythe and aimed the Brute Shot at its master's chest.

A flicker of surprise spread throughout the Brute's features. "You have foreseen your death, Demon," Cronus said, his voice betraying his show of confidence.

"Where's Truth?" he simply asked, figuring he had a shot. Cronus, however, let out a roar and lunged for him. John ran backward, firing Brute Shot grenades. The Brute struck each of the grenades in the air with the scythe, causing them to go off at a harmless distance. Well, not entirely harmless. The grenades did singe Cronus's fur, but never slowed him down for more than a few seconds.

This was a bad scenario, being trapped in a tight corridor with this monster of a Brute. He would have preferred fighting a Hunter pair in an open field, armed only with a needler. He looked around, trying to see a way out.

There. A ledge overhead with an opening. Cronus glanced up; he saw it as well. Sudden movement on his sensor: two hostiles coming up behind him. He chanced a glance at the new arrivals: red Brutes, each carrying large unfamiliar weapons. He grabbed his last grenade, a plasma, and threw it to the floor at their feet.

"Demon flare!" The red Brutes leaped away, while Cronus held his ground and slashed at him.

John, however, ran toward the grenade. In the instant before it went off, he jumped up in the air and did a backflip. When the blast came, he was far enough away to avoid death, yet close enough to take advantage of its force. Using the added momentum, he flew backwards and onto the ledge.

Before the Brutes could process what happened, he fired a shot down at them. He then quickly entered the tunnel, soon realizing that its walls were caked with wax. It was too late to turn away, though, for Cronus made a great leap up to the ledge.

"Sir, the Dronesâ€¦" he heard a Brute call out.

"Only Truthâ€¦" the other started.

"Do you think I care?!" Cronus bellowed, charging John once again.

Having little choice, he ran into the waxy tunnel. There was an upside, though. The smaller, cramped tunnel made it impossible for Cronus to properly wield his scythe, something of which John took full advantage.

He fired, again, and again. Bluish blood stained yellow wax, and yet still Cronus came. He finally reached the end of his belt, but could not pause to replace it. Worse, he now detected numerous blips on his motion sensor.

Cronus could see he had the advantage. A cruel smile lifted his cheeks, "Now you die."

John stopped as they stepped past a corridor leading to the larger chamber. He could see and hear all the Drones with which the room must have been filled. He addressed the Brute calmly, "Wrong. I _always_ win."

He took off running down the corridor, hoping against hope his suspicions were correct. Suddenly, his shields were assaulted by what appeared to be violet plasma streaming from Cronus's scythe blade. As soon as he reached the mouth of the tunnel, he leaped to the side, allowing the plasma to streak across the floor of the chamber, vaporizing a row of Drones.

The Drone hive went insane, the male insects flying everywhere. Fortunately, they ignored John for the moment, allowing him to reload his Brute Shot while his shield recharged.

"Brute!" he heard the Queen hiss from somewhere under the wax as Cronus came out of the tunnel. "You _dare_ to violate our law?!"

"I come upon the orders of the Prophet of Justice," the Brute argued, batting away nearby Drones with the blunt of his blade. "The Demon has entered your nest, and I have orders to slay it."

"Justice?" the Queen said dismissively. "The Prophet of _Truth_ gave us our territory, and only _he_ may allow filthy Brutes to enter."

Three Drones crawled over to John, their weapons lowered. He carefully held still, allowing them to inspect him. After a moment, they began climbing up his MJOLNIR armor, their antennae moving back and forth. _What have I gotten myself into?_

Meanwhile, Cronus growled at the hive. "The Prophet of Justice is the true power in the Covenant, regardless of what his title may be. Soon you will see. Until thenâ€¦" The Brute raised his scythe; the blade

glowed and then released a great stream of plasma, reminiscent of Regret's gravity cannon. He swept the blade across the nearest Drones even as he fired, killing great scores of the creatures.

"Rampaging lunatic!" the Queen screamed, emerging from the wall as the Drones opened fire upon the Brute.

John gently shook the Drones off his body and made his exit. The hive let him leave, and he wondered if Cronus had even noticed him through the swarm. Regardless, he intended to make the best of the small miracle that was Covenant politics.

He needed to find Truth, kill him, and then deal with this Prophet of Justice. If Justice was the 'true power' as Cronus had said, then stopping Truth could possibly not be enough. _One step at a time._

However, it turned out that his choice was made for him. Once again, he found himself on the radio with Fleet Admiral Hood.

"Master Chief, you still alive?" his radio crackled.

"Sir," he responded. "The situation has become more complicated. The Prophet of Truth has an heir present onboard this shipâ€¦"

The Prophet of Truth is on a Seraph getting a front-row seat of the destruction of Sydney," the Fleet Admiral interrupted. _"You have new orders: defend HighCom Facility Bravo-6 from the invading Covenant forces. The work going on there may be vital to our success. Understood?_"

"Sir," he answered, surprised at the drastic change of orders. "Yes, sir."

"Cairo out," Lord Terrence Hood's voice broadcasted clearly before Fafnir cut the connection. _A fine work if I do say so myself,_ the AI thought, a reptillian grin spreading across his avatar's face

Sure impersonating an admiral was grounds for termination, but that only made it that much more invigorating. Besides, his programming clearly dictated that defense of the databanks was to be his highest priority. Even if he as seized by the Covenant, he would _not_ sacrifice the data.

I owe my donor that much at leastâ€¦ He sometimes wondered if he was showing signs of 'Rampancy', a supposed 'illness' suffered by AIs that drove them to a state of insanity. In the end it mattered very little, he supposed .

He hacked into the security cameras of the base on the surface, and studied a Covenant Unggoy being interrogated. _"Ascension, Ascension,"_ the alien exclaimed as it was shown a hologram of the Forerunner ship. Fafnir began a swift search through the Covenant interrogation archives, bringing up every mention of '_Ascension_'.

18. Wheel's Turn

Cronus walked briskly through the halls, his scythe dripping the remains of Yanme'e onto the otherwise pristine silver floor. He ignored it, even as he knew his master was always watching. His master controlled every aspect of this holy ship, even the walls themselvesâ€|

His eye began to twitch, and he willed it to still. It would not do to focus on such matters, not when there was prey to be slain. He knew he had to be close, that his prey was weakened. Even the unholy Demon would be no match for the might of the Blade of Kesmek.

_If that bloody__ hive had not gotten in the way, the Demon's skull would already be decorating my belt!_ He growled, but soon calmed himself. He would fix what mistakes were made, remove the Demon's presence from the world, and secure his place at the feet of his master.

"Cronus?" the disembodied voice of the Prophet of Justice suddenly whispered in his ear. "Have you failed me, Cronus?"

He froze where he stood, his fingers tightening reflexively around the scythe handle. "Iâ€" I have not, my lord," he denied, speaking to plain air. The blade began to crackle with violet energy, and he hastily loosened his grip in fear that it would be taken as a hostile action. He continued on, "I have yet to slay the Demon, it is true, but you can be assured that it will not live to harm that which you have worked so hard for all these cyclesâ€|"

"Oh, I am certain it will not," his master stated, the Prophet's voice spontaneously cheerful. "The powers of this ship cannot be altered by a mere mortal, after all. Should it survive much longer, however, I may be tempted to have you replaced, Cronus."

"It will not," he stated firmly. "The Demon will be dead before the 123rd can learn of its presence."

"Is that a promise?" his master asked, the Prophet's voice now cool and dangerous.

"It is."

"Splendid." The Prophet of Justice's voice was cheery once more. "You should hurry," he added in a playful tone. "The Demon has reached the boarding lift and is proceeding to exit _Ascension_."

"My lord, I will hurry," he replied, alarmed at the progress his prey had made since their last encounter.

"Good," the Prophet said simply. "Carry on."

Sergeant Aliyah Burakgazi surveyed her men. They had holed themselves up in an old church. The architecture of these holy structures tended to be of a significantly better quality than the surrounding buildings, making it an ideal location to which they could fall back.

Unfortunately, she had to take care of more than just Marines. For a city in which evacuation had been declared, a good number of civilians had decided to stay behind. Some thought they could do a better job than the UNSC, while others believed God sent the Covenant to kill them or some other nonsense.

Most civilians they had shuffled out before the serious fighting started. Her unit, however, had been forced to rescue a man who carved up his legs, a man who had tried to crucify himself (Reverend Jacob Castell, referred to as 'cross guy' by her unit), a woman who tried to sacrifice her baby to some pagan god (she now lay in the corner, her hands and legs bound tightly), and some fool with an illegally obtained M6G magnum who thought that he could singlehandedly defend his store from the Brutes. _Nothing like an invasion to bring out the crazies._

"â€|And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelousâ€|" Cross Guy mumbled from the stretcher he lay strapped to a few feet away. She had to strain to hear him, although there wasn't much point to it. The nutter nailed his own hand to the great crucifix on the altar less than fifteen feet away from them now, and then yelled for help to nail his second hand. _Idiot._

Private Kloet, sitting with his back resting against the wall, glanced up from his lap and followed her gaze. He remarked, "Can't say I exactly blame himâ€| Now's a time to get right with the Lord."

"Coulda picked a better way," Private Tornincasa retorted. "Such as sending these pagan bastards to the Hell they crawled out of!"

"Seven angels," Cross Guy muttered (apparently) in response.

"_Ma'am,"_ Private Borgnino, the sniper she had put in the tower, radioed in, interrupting their conversation. "_Baby Kongs coming this way!"_

"Hush!" she hissed to everyone. The Brutes had very good senses, and could hear voices from several meters away. Private Tornincasa clamped a hand over Cross Guy's mouth. "They come this way, take 'em out!" She ordered Borgnino in a terse whisper.

Silence.

"â€|Over," she added as an afterthought.

Still nothing.

"_Yeahâ€| the Bravo Kilos are heading back the way they came,"_ Borgnino muttered finally.

"That was close!" Private Kloet laughed loudly in delight. His laughter abruptly ended with the crack of a sniper rifle.

"_Yeahâ€| the Brutes are coming backâ€|"_ Borgnino sighed.

"Good job, mate," Tornincasa jeered as he grabbed his assault rifle. "Nearly got away if you hadn'tâ€"

"Knock it off," she snapped as further cracks were heard. "Let's do this! Ivers, Nylias, see if you can pick them off through the windows. Kloet, Rapp, Zolnerowich, Tornincasa, you're with me. We'll set up an ambush in case they get in. Gagnon, keep an eye on the civilians. Go, go, go!"

She led her team to a position on the second level overlooking the opening. They now stood on either side of a walkway spanning the distance between two the sides, at eyelevel with a great stained glass image of Jesus ascending into Heaven. Crossing herself, she made a quick prayer before directing her team into place. It was now only a matter of patience.

She did not have to wait long. Loud pounding soon could be heard coming from the door. "Can you get it?" she whispered to Borgnino, but received only static in response. "_Staying silent or dead?" "Ivers, Bravo Kilo by the entrance?" she asked instead, forcing all of her concern into the back of her mind.

"_I can't get at 'em, he's out of my range,"_ was Ivers' terse reply.

"_Yeah, me neither,"_ Nylias muttered. "_The others ran off too. Be back with Drones, probably."_

She winced at the thought of having to fight off the aerial infantry the Covies had so recently begun to use against them. At least she knew from the lone bezerker that at barest one of the BKs had been killed. She how Brutes tended to lose control of their emotions when their partners were killed and charged their enemies like wild animals. "Alright, here's what's gonna happen," she beganâ€¦ Then Jesus' head exploded.

A spike grenade smashed through the window, spraying glass through the air as it attached itself to the ceiling above them. She signalled for her men to take cover even as the grenade detonated, hurtling white-hot spikes at them. Kloet screamed â€œ a spike had pierced his chest. The others lay around him, dead instantly. Yet she alone lay unharmed. "_Divine intervention or just pure dumb luck?"

As Kloet's screams filled the air, she crawled to the bodies of her men. Despite the horrible feeling in her stomach, she scavanged the forms that had been alive mere seconds before. Collecting grenades, she began to pile them up. The chances weren't good, but she would continue to fight off the Covie bastards as best as she could.

There was a brief flash of light and Kloet abruptly stopped screaming. His body fell to the floor, a rectangular hole in his forehead. "_Particle beam rifle._ Jackals.

She darted away from the window and activated her radio. "Ivers, Nylias, Gagnon, the Brutes tricked us. It looks like we're all that's left. There's Jackals in the buildings to our west, and the Brutes can lob grenades through the second-story. Proceed with caution."

"_Understood, ma'am,"_ they all answered.

"_There seem to be some Drones fighting someone over the factory

cross the way,"_ Nylias added. _"Civilians from the look of it â€" haven't made contact. When the Buggers finish with them, they'll come after us for sureâ€"|"_

"Drones," she sighed. "Got it." She started to tell Gagnon to leave the civilians, but paused as she heard a wooshing sound. A human scream pierced the air as gunfire erupted.

A pair of spike grenades soared in through the shattered window, latched onto the floor below and fired their deadly packages. None of the spikes reached her, but she could hear one of the male civilians screaming in pain. A shot rang out, and the scream was silenced.

"_You didn't hear that,"_ Gagnon said after a moment.

"Hear what?" she muttered. He didn't reply.

The door smashed open. The BK stepped inside with a cocky swagger, a Brute Shot held casually in its hands. She primed a grenade, counted, and then dropped it. The Brute could only look up in surprise before being blown apart by the explosive.

"_Nice one,"_ Gagnon congratulated.

"_Not so fast! Here come his drunken cousins from Coral,"_ Ivers said, his voice strained even as he joked.

"How many?" she whispered.

"_Three that I can see,"_ he answered. _"Brute Shot, carbine, maulerâ€"|"_ A series of rapid shots could be heard, triggering a response from the BKs. _"Two! Carbine, maulerâ€"|"_ he laughed into the radioâ€"|" and abruptly stopped at the same time as the Brutes stopped firing.

Damn it! She mentally swore long and hard as she prepared the grenades. There was no chance left of victory, all she could do was try to take down as many as she could before she went. One by one, she lobbed the grenades out the window with all her might. Through the booming explosions, the delightful sound of a Brute screaming in pain met her ears and a crazy grin split her face.

It seemed to be an almost dream-like state when she saw the flame grenade float through the air. Then it smashed onto the walkway, spilling out its liquid death. She hopped back with a yelp as the ignited gel sent the walkway crashing to the ground.

It took her several seconds to register the sound of screaming, human screaming. She looked back to see the rest of the church on fire. While three BKs had kept her busy, more had attacked from the other sides. From the look of the windows, it was easy to see where they had sent more flame grenades into the temple.

The hogtied woman now lay in a pool of fire, screaming her lungs out. Squinting, she could just pick out Gagnon through the smoke, bending over Cross Guy. _Wonder what scripture he's got for this?_ she couldn't help but wonder as she raised a battle rifle. She aimed for the woman's forehead, and then pulled the trigger. _Better than living with the pain,_ she reasoned as the body fell limp.

She sucked in a breath through her teeth as no less than six Brutes made their way through the door. Armed to the teeth, the Brutes swaggered in as if they truly owned the place and looked around with contempt. _Pain indeed._ She took aim at one who's head was not protected by a helmetâ€|

"Jesus will save you!" It was Cross Guy. Gagnon must have let him out. He waved his arms through the air and ran at the Brutes, screaming "Jesus will save you!" repeatedly. He took a spike through the throat within seconds.

She fired, dropping the BK. Almost at the same instant, Gagnon fired from within the cover of smoke, causing the helmet of the BK that killed Cross Guy to fly off. She took the opportunity to send another one of the damned bastards straight to the hot place. _That's right! Cross Guy was __our__ wacko!_

The Brutes roared and chucked a flurry of plasma grenades into the smoke. Gagnon's scream was soon heard amidst the explosions. _Damnit!_ She blinked back tears of frustration, trying to figure out a way to either escape or cause significant damage to the enemy.

"Human _female_," a deep voice cackled from behind her, pronouncing the unfamiliar words with some difficulty.

"_B'aka!_" she hissed, using the one word she'd bothered to remember from her lessons on the Covenant language. She turned her head to regard the laughing BK, simultaneously reaching for a grenade.

"Well spoken," the alien stated matter-of-factly, a smirk visible on his lips. He stood on the base of the broken window, forming a dark silhouette against the burning city in the background. "What other talents do you have?

"I can make you die!" she screamed, priming the grenade and thrusting it into his face.

The Brute snapped out his hand, enclosing around her wrist and forcing the grenade from her grip. To her dismay, he tossed it out the window to detonate harmlessly (to the Covies, anyway) on the street below. With the strength of an elephant, he pulled her against his bulk. "You commit the folly of Vrouw," he snickered. "Ages past, we too allowed females to hunt. But when the Mannelijkâ€|"

"I could _die_ from boredom," she complained, rolling her eyes at the Brute. Inside she was shrieking in terror, reciting prayer after prayer in the mad hope that someone was listening, but she kept her exterior cool. "Twist my arm off or something already, for God's sakeâ€|"

The Brute blinked in confusion. He opened his mouth to say something, but never got to start. From the window, a great flash of light pierced the air and from it rose a human figure. Like an avenging angel, the Spartan struck down the Brute with a shining sword â€" albeit a Covenant energy sword.

Then the Spartan turned from her to deal with the other BKs, who she realized were currently doing their best to defile the holy temple.

"_Demon_!" the Brutes all cried at the sight of the armored warrior. _Look who's talking, bobos!_

The ape-like Covies were no match for the Spartan-II. They, like so many others, fell easily to the superior warrior. The pink blade sliced through the BKs with a raging intensity, and soon only the Spartan stood victorious.

He (she?) walked over and, climbing up to her, offered a hand. She accepted and allowed the Spartan to pull her into a standing position. "Sergeant," the Spartan acknowledged in a cool, if tired, male voice.

"Master Chief," she answered, recognizing the voice from the awards ceremony a few weeks ago. "Thank you for the assistance, sir. I never could have fought off those Brutes without you."

The Spartan nodded shortly. "I've been assigned to the defense of Bravo-6," he subtly jerked his head to regard the devastation surrounding them.

She understood what he had left unsaid. There was little point anymore to follow her orders. Helping this Spartan was sure to be far more important. She scooped up a couple of Brute plasma rifles. "Rest in peace," she muttered to the corpses around her, then headed out.

'HighCom Facility Bravo-6', as the Humans referred to it, was well on its way to being cleared away. Seven scarabs, each accompanied by several Jiralhanae-piloted vehicles, were performing excellently. Once the Human infestation was removed, the Blind Cartographer could be located.

That the Humans had built directly over the Blind Cartographer, an essential tool for finding the path, was far too improbable to be a mere coincidence. Should the Humans have correctly understood the significance? he did not like to think about what that might mean. _They would need Ascension,_ he assured himself. _And the Luminous Key._

Without the knowledge acquired by the First over the ages, the information contained in the Blind Cartographer was surely useless. _But one part of a much greater whole._ Still, it unsettled him.

"Pono Matakite!" the voice of the Prophet of Justice whispered in his ear.

He cringed. "That. Is. Not. My. Name," he hissed back to _Ascension_, careful to keep his voice low enough to not attract the attention of his Honor Guards. "I am the Prophet of Truth!"

"Of course you are," Justice's voice twisted into a mocking tone, one he had heard the Prophet use on the High Council quite often. Truth gripped the sides of his throne with frustration as the voice went on, "The Demon has followed us to this place. It makes its way to the Blind Cartographer as we speak."

"Has it?" he muttered, annoyed that he was never informed of the Demon's presence on Ascension at all.

"When it reaches the holy ground, do not impede its progress until the necessary information is obtained," the voice continued as though he had never spoken.

"May I inquire as to why you wish to let that filth enter the Forerunner structure?" he asked derisively.

"You may," came the smug reply. "Your last entry into the Luminous Key has revealed a hidden power possessed by these Demons. It may well be the very key to our ascension."

"Bloodâ€¦" he muttered, remembering the reports.

"Something beings such as ourselves can appreciate a great deal," Justice's voice said solemnly. "Pay close attention and you may even grasp the startling implications of that fact. Maybe."

Annoyed, he lightly stroked a line to produce a calming warmth from the seat of his throne. If I could but punish that insolentâ€¦ But, of course, he could not. "You could explain your theories," he suggested instead, keeping a casual manner.

"I think not. Figure it out on your own â€" it will be a good exercise," the disembodied voice said offhandedly. "Now, Cronus will be along shortly to slay the Demon. I ask only that you wait until the Blind Cartographer is revealed. As soon as this happens, let the Demon feel the true wrath of the Hierarchs."

"You mean Cronus," he stated, no question in his voice. It was plain to see that his throne could not protect him any more than Regret's did, placing all of his trust in his servants. It was an unsettling revelation.

"If that is all you can muster," Justice's voice now carried a tone of boredom. "Well, I shall see you on the other side, cousin."

The Prophet's words had an odd ring of finality to them. Truth wondered uneasily if it referred to something other than the promise of divinity. A mutiny of Ascension? He would not think it possible were the evidence not staring him in the face.

He swallowed, and tried not to think about what this suggested about their constant search for the path. It did not matter anyway. All he could do was increase the output of heat in an attempt to ward off his mounting dread. For the first time in an age, he knew he was going to lose.

Fafnir monitored the approaching Spartan via a series of satellite cameras. The soldier was truly one of a kind. No other human, enhanced or otherwise, had ever survived the ordeals this one had been put through.

It had been a good move to seize control of John-117, he was sure. He had been sure when he had violated UNSC law and the Asimov protocol, but it was always nice to know for certain. Or perhaps he could not

truly know for certainâ€| but he calculated a 99.7 probability of successâ€| Yes.

He would further delight when the Spartan could share with him what he had seen within the Forerunner ship. According to his findings, the Covenant believed that the ship, which they called Ascension, was a necessary vehicle for their Great Journey. Doubtlessly the ship was filled with religious artifacts, sure to be fascinating. Perhaps he could even use the information to develop some form of advantage for his creators (ONI, not the civilian who gave birth to his donor).

He refreshed the Tomb data. More corridors had been mapped out, but the scientists were ignoring the architecture in favor of searching for weapons. He opened a channel to Dr. Milbauer to demand that he record the hieroglyphics. A moment later he was reviewing crudely drawn sketches via the scientist's data pad.

He ran his Forerunner translation software, but most of the glyphs could not be matched. He was only able to determine what he already knew, that the Tomb was on Earth and that it contained directions to that which could keep the Forerunners safe from the Flood. Unfortunately, the directions were not included in that particular stretch of writing.

Continuing to pester the scientists, he moved his primary focus back on the Spartan. John-117 was extremely adept at plowing his way through the Covenant forces, even bringing a lone Marine alongside him (Sergeant Aliyah Burakgazi, Service Number: 00061-85039-AB, according to her barcode). Howeverâ€|

He examined the surrounding Covenant and made his avatar frown. It looked as though they expected the Spartan, yet still sent out weak troops such as Unggoy and Kig-Yar into his pathâ€| He checked up on the Jiralhanae Chieftain's progress and found that he had given up the chase, instead moving directly toward Bravo-6.

A trap? But of course. But a trap for whom, the Spartan or the Hive?

He noted that the weak troops sent out against John-117 all carried weak weapons and wondered if the Covenant intended to force the Spartan to use up his superior weaponry before striking with all their might? It was a possibility, one that he could correct. He hacked into the autopilot of a nearby Albatross transport and placed it in a trajectory to crash into a group of Covenant Shadows not far from the Spartan's position.

He refreshed the Tomb data â€" still nothing worthwhile. He urged the scientists to investigate an area marked with the Forerunner character for Flood, provided that they do so with extreme caution. The colors were different from those featured in the Flood containment facility of Halo Installation 04 and he was almost certain that meant there were none here, but it was still best to be cautious. Always cautious.

The Spartan responded to the crash as Fafnir had expected. The Spartan was now equipped with a MA5C ICWS assault rifle, a M41 SSR MAV/AW rocket launcher, two M9 HE-DP grenades, and he and the Marine were now heading out in a M274 Ultra-Light All-Terrain Vehicle. The

numerous lives of Marines who had died in the crash were well spent.

An emergency evacuation process shocked his focus back to Bravo-6. Issued by Jordan Harelâ€¦ He immediately opened a channel into the Admiral's quarters. "Admiral, you must see reason," he began, only to be interrupted.

"No, Fafnir, there's no other option," the human sighed. "I see that now. Milbauer informs me that there are rooms marked with the word for Flood. If the Flood were to escape, it would be catastrophic. Far worse than anything the Covenant could do."

"Sir, the character is printed in blue," he argued. "My studies show that only the color red indicates active life. The Flood are not actually inside the Tombâ€¦"

"I can't take that chance," Harel said stubbornly. "We're leaving. The Tomb's to be destroyed at once."

"I see, sir."

Due to what was recorded as a dumb AI malfunction, the doors of Harel's quarters bolted shut. Despite the efforts of several technicians, they were unable to reopen them. Even more alarming was the inability for anyone to contact the admiral from outside. Fafnir didn't care.

"My lord, no action on my part could ever hope to compensate for the grave dishonor I have have done you," Cronus said, his head bowed low to the floor of the Prophet's Seraph.

"Indeed," the High Prophet of Truth murmured. He waved a hand lightly to the Honor Guards, "Leave us."

Cronus remained still, barely allowing himself to breathe as the Jiralhanae left them alone. _Surely a punishment must have an audience?_ he thought hopefully. He could not have made it this close to be simply discarded!

"You acted on the orders of theâ€¦ of the Prophet of Justice?" the High Prophet asked him, his voice tinged with anger.

"I did, my lord," he admitted. "Theâ€¦ Justice requested that I not inform you of the Demon's presence."

"I see."

He shivered at the High Prophet's cold silence. "Noblest Prophet, it was my understanding that you wished for theâ€¦ for the Prophet of Justice to rise in your place should you fall," he added, trying to find any ground on which he could stand.

"It was," the High Prophet said, a note of disgust in his voice. "It is no longer my belief that the High Prophet of Justice remains fit to uphold the ancient legacy. Long years run the course on old souls, and the Prophet's reincarnation is long overdue. Cronus, where does your loyalty lay?"

"With you, my lord," he promised. _Would any disagree at his feet?_

"Very well," Truth said finally. "You may rise."

Slowly he raised his head to look up at the 123rd. The Prophet met his gaze and held up a metal ball. _A heretic's holodrone,_ he realized. As he watched, the holodrone floated from the Prophet's hand and down to Cronus' face. An eye on the High Prophet to make sure what he did was expected, he slowly reached out and grasped the ball.

"Should I fall in battle and Justice yet lives, engage the holodrone in a secure location," Truth instructed. "It will give you all the information needed to slay him. Remember, only use it if I am no longer able to command. It will guide you to victory."

"I will, my lord," he bowed. He carefully placed the holodrone in his sack of plasma grenades. None would know of its presence without Cronus' permission.

A chirp rang out, signaling the Honor Guards to return to the chamber. "Until further notice, you are to remain here as my personal guardian," Truth stated as the Jiralhanae returned to the chamber. "Even Tartarus will not possess what I am about to give you. Nestor," he spoke to an Honor Guard, "Fit Cronus for the shield."

"Praise the Lord," the Marine said, staring at him in awe. "It _is_ a Spartan."

He and Sergeant Burakgazi had paused to examine the smashed remains of a Scarab and had found a convoy of Warthogs waiting for them. "I am Master Chief SPARTAN-117," he said. "Who is in command?"

"No one here, sir, just First Sergeant Kader back at base. Sir, if you don't mind me asking, why are you here? I heard all the Spartans were off-planet."

That was news to him. Wondering briefly about his family, he answered the soldier, "I have orders to assist in the defense of Bravo-6."

"Well, we have orders to escort you to it," another Marine laughed in good spirits. "We'd better hurry if we don't want the Covies all over us."

"Agreed," he replied. They started moving. Their close proximity to Bravo-6 was rapidly becoming apparent. Above them, Seraphs and Longswords dueled in a mad frenzy. Further up still were cruisers of both factions, circling each other like feral dogs.

Yet, the opposition faced by them seemed quite tame considering their surroundings. Were the Covenant putting all their strength into attacking Bravo-6 instead of defending the perimeter? John found it doubtful.

A trap from Cronus and the Prophet of Justice, more likely. "Be on your guard," he called to the Marines.

"You got it, Chief," one replied. His voice was entirely too cheerful for the situation, making John wonder if they had been chewing pick-up sticks on duty.

A creeping sensation tickled the back of his neck, and John knew from ages of experience that they were being watched. He cautiously glanced around, trying to see any Covie that might have hitched a ride under the cloak of active camouflage but could find none. Careful to remain driving in a straight line, he switched his helmet's view to night vision.

There was a brief, perhaps one fourth of a second long, pause as he adjusted to the sharp night vision. Wishing Cortana was there to do this for him, he carefully adjusted the range of the electromagnetic spectrum so that he could view the heat of objects. Again, a brief pause to adjust to the change, and then he got to work.

As far as he could tell, there were no Covies hidden on the vehicles. The only heat sources registered were from the Marines and the engines themselves. He glanced back and forth to see if any Sentinels were following them, and then he saw it: a large mass in the shape of a Seraph trailing behind them. He switched back to normal vision to see nothing but air.

The Sergeant looked up at him, thinking he was looking at her. "Aye, Chief," she said in agreement. "Nothing but Grunts and Jackals since the church. Looks like a trap to me."

"A camouflaged Seraph is following us," he informed her. He passed her the launcher, "3 o' clock." She fired; the rocket flew towards the area where he knew the Seraph was and it impacted.

"What the?" a Warthog gunner shouted as a damaged Seraph appeared out of the air. He opened fire. The Seraph flew higher, out of range. It did not return fire.

The Sergeant fired another rocket, but the Seraph dodged it. It still refrained from attacking. Out of nowhere, a Pelican appeared and rammed the Seraph, causing both to erupt in a violent fireball. As one, the ships crashed to the ground.

"Holy Christ!" a Marine cried.

"What the bloody hell were they thinking?" yelled another.

Regardless of the Pelican pilot's intentions, the Seraph's were equally mysterious and potentially dangerous. _Even when it was revealed, it didn't fight back,_ he mused. It had likely been ordered to spy on him and not attack, but for it to remain defenseless suggested the orders came from a particularly threatening individual. _Truth or Justice._

"Heads up," a Marine from the Warthog in the lead called out. "Battle zone up ahead!"

They emerged out of the city ruins and into a vast field of freshly

cooled glass. War raged around them. Scarabs, Shadows, Wraiths, Spectres, Phantoms, Ghosts, Banshees, and other Covenant vehicles he had never seen before fought with Elephants, Cougars, Scorpions, Warthogs, Pelicans, Mongooses, Hornets, and other UNSC vehicles. Not to mention the aerial battle that raged overhead. And in the center, surrounded by bodies of both UNSC and Covenant, stood Bravo-6.

He looked around at the battle, trying to assess the scenario. Something about it looked off. _The sides are too even,_ he realized. The Covenant were holding back. Why?

"Bravo-6, this is Golf7," he heard a Marine radio. "Bringing home the prize!"

As he watched, the UNSC forces parted to let them throughâ€¦ and so did the Covenant. Afraid he was jumping to conclusions, he studied the Covenant forces carefully. Sure enough, they all avoided his convoy. _Brute rebellion?_ he wondered, _Or Prophet trap?_ He knew what the odds were.

Fafnir made his avatar's cheeks lift up into a grin. The Spartan had made it to Bravo-6. His data was now surely secure.

Even the Covenant realized it. Their forces were retreating back the way they came, toward _Ascension_. He waved at the UNSC forces, using First Sergeant Kader's voice, to keep them on the run. "Don't let them recover," he called. "We got 'em where we want 'em!"

A hundred transponders vanished from existence. Alarmed, he looked out to see a CCS engaged in a glassing maneuver, claiming the lives of most of his defense force. The cruiser _Nosferatu_ was already fighting back, but despite the damage to the CCS it continued to clear the battlefield.

I made a mistake, he realized. He had to _do_ something! "Retreat," he told Kader. "Take the infantry and retreat into the Hive. The Spartan is with us. He can defend us."

"Agreed," Kader replied simply, moving to give the orders. He always accepted Fafnir's advice, and Fafnir couldn't help but like him.

After the Spartan had begun his descent, along with other infantry, he opened a channel to the _Nosferatu_. It had been damaged by the Covenant, but it still remained in the air fighting. He avoided the standard channels and instead spoke directly with the _Nosferatu_'s shipboard AI, named Kratos.

While first startled by his idea, Kratos soon came around after Fafnir explained the importance of protecting the data. Fafnir sent him the override codes and, maintaining a connection with _Nosferatu_, contacted the nearby cruiser _Strudbrug_ and its AI, Bia. Soon he had two ships at his command, and he moved them into play.

He made the _Nosferatu_ back off to keep the CCS moving towards Bravo-6, and called the _Strudbrug_ in to fight off the ships attacking _Nosferatu_. _Computer rebellion,_ he giggled. If he had

attempted this at any other moment, he never would have gotten away with it. He wasn't even sure he could get away with it now. _But the data must survive._

There. The CCS was in position. It had maintained its glassing pattern and had eliminated all UNSC forces by circling Bravo-6, gradually reducing the radius until all that remained was Bravo-6. That and a few helpless Wolverines that were trying to pick off the Seraphs.

The CCS would clear it all away, and then the Scarabs would burrow underneath where Bravo-6 was built. They would enter the Hive and discover the Tomb. That was their plan, anyway, but Fafnir had different plans.

The _Nosferatu_ fired once more upon the CCS, this time using every weapon it was equipped with. The _Strudbrug_ followed suit from the opposite side of the CCS. He had the two ships fly directly toward the CCS at full atmospheric speed. The CCS tried to run, but his ships were faster. They collided directly over Bravo-6.

That was good, he decided as the debris rained down on the installation. The combined debris of the cruisers was sure to slow down the approaching Covenant. It would hopefully buy enough time.

"Fafnir, have you totally lost it?" Kader demanded at a holotank in the Hive. "You've just plugged us in here!"

He generated his hologram. "I did what was necessary to keep the data safe," he informed the human. "I was under the impression that you understood its valueâ€|"

"God, Fafnir, you're reallyâ€|" Kader trailed off and sighed, "Listenâ€| Wâ€|"

The facility above them had been destroyed. They now stood three kilometers below it in the facility's counterpart, the Hive. John, the Sergeant, and about fifty Marines had made it. The Hive was originally commanded by Admiral Jordan Harel, however, after a computer error sealed him in his quarters, control had gone to First Sergeant Kader.

Kader had traveled down the lifts with them. He now turned to address John, "Master Chief, I must say it is a supreme honor to stand in your presence. Were it not for you and yours, we'd all be saluting the flag of the UFRâ€| Sir, I'm finding myself becoming desperate beyond measure. I could get in a lot of trouble for what I'm about to say to you, butâ€| well, to be frank, someone in power is a total idiot."

The Marines laughed; some of them whistled. John just nodded, waiting for more information.

"This facility," Kader began slowly, nervous sweat appearing on his neck, "Hides one of the greatest secrets of human history. We call it Daniel's Tomb after the fallen angel of myth, said to have fathered giantsâ€| It is an extensive underground complex constructed of

unknown materials, and appears to have been here since over 100,000 years before the birth of Christ."

The Marines fell into a shocked silence. John, however, had suspected such a thing. He nodded again.

After a moment, Kader continued, "Since its discovery soon after the Interplanetary War, the UNSC had attempted to unlock the secrets of the chamber. We were unable to make much progress before your discovery of Halo, sir. The symbols you recorded on its control panel were particularly useful, I believe. Fafnir, our AI, can give you the details.

What you need to know is that when the Forâ€", er, Covenant ship landed overhead, all sorts of doors started opening into places we've never been able to access. Upon landing, the Covenant immediately focused all their energy on destroying Bravo-6. It could be they're after the Hive. After all, it houses some of our greatest secrets and our new toysâ€| But! That ship, the one that looks like the Grand Tokyo Tower, appears to have been built by the same people that built Daniel's Tomb! It may very well be that the Covenant are after our greatest secret of allâ€|"

"Understood," John said, feeling he'd heard enough. This was what needed the protection of a Spartan. "First Sergeant, allow me to take advantage of these 'toys' of yours? The Covenant will be sure to employ theirs."

"Of course, sir," Kader said, looking at John with respect. "Fafnir?" A nearby holotank activated, displaying a hologram of a European dragon. "Show our new recruits to the armory."

The dragon gave a deep bow, "Certainly, Rais. Your wish is my desire." The hologram morphed into a three-dimensional map.

The Scarabs had been tunneling for the better part of the unit. The Humans had caused quite a mess, but with threats from the Prophet of Truth to encourage them, the site had been cleared of wreckage. Finally, the report came that the Human facility had been reached.

A pack of seven Jiralhanae had built and now guarded a gravity lift at the bottom of the shaft. One by one, they descended. Jiralhane, Kig-Yar, Unggoy, and even a few Sangheili had joined the hunting parties.

Theirs was a most noble task. They would clear away the Human infestation to allow the Prophet of Truth to access the Blind Cartographer. Unlike the many who had sacrificed themselves in service of a Prophet who may have been looking in the right direction, they knew that the Great Journey was just around the next bend and they could see the obvious benefit of their service.

Faith and blind devotion had many useful properties, but utter certainty was infinitely more useful. This was what made Cronus certain that they would win. The Demon, for all of his power and skill, was still just a Human. Should he not die by my hand, he will

doubtlessly be purged in the cleansing flame._

He examined the holograms of the Ossoona, Sangheili in the Human facility who acted as the eyes of the Prophet of Truth. Truth himself gave the displays the barest of glances, he seemed focused on composing his next speech. Cronus, however, studied the battles that were taking place beneath the surface.

At one instance, his eyes widened. A Human had thrown a metallic object into a crowd of Major Jiralhanae, and mere heartbeats later their body shields drained away, allowing the Humans to take their lives with mere pistols. "Prophet of Truth," he spoke as the Ossoona whose view he was watching died, "The Humans have some form of power drainer." He explained what had happened.

"Indeed?" the High Prophet questioned, looking up curiously. "I believe it is time we introduce the Sharquoi. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Mine the area and fall back," John snapped as he watched the hulking creatures tear apart his Marines. He tossed a trip mine into the creatures' paths, and ran toward the Tomb. "Fall back now!"

These large Covies, referred to as Hulks by the Marines, had smashed their way through the Hive. John had been forced to destroy several black-level prototypes to prevent the technology from entering Covenant hands, but made use of as much as he could. In addition to the special equipment obtained, he had replaced his Mark-VI MJOLNIR with a new, more durable Mark-VII.

Without the upgrade, he doubted he could have made it through half of these fights. The Hulks were immensely strong, smashing through walls as if they were butter. They were losing ground fast, and it looked like the Tomb was their only refuge point. Not only were the walls too strong for the Hulks to break, the Covies would most likely refuse to even attempt to harm the Forerunner structure.

"The Covenant must not get ahold of Fafnir," Kader cried as he ran for the entrance, pulling a data crystal chip out of a holotank.

"Give it to me," he held out his hand. In Cortana's absence, Fafnir could survive inside his implants.

"You don't understand," Kader refused, pocketing the chip. "Fafnir is corrupted!"

He wasted no more time arguing, figuring that Kader would know better about an AI he had worked with far longer than John had. He skirted around the mines that were being planted to fire at a Grunt's air tank; it exploded, killing a nearby Jackal.

"This is as good as it's going to get," Sergeant Burakgazi called.

"Fall back!" he cried, slinging a flash-bang into the crowd of Covies. They ran down a tunnel, the white walls changing to dark blue stone. And then they entered the Forerunner complex known as Daniel's

Tomb.

They stood in a round room, covered in Aztec-like carvings, and containing scientific equipment. The room appeared at first to be made of marble, but at a closer look John could tell it was metallic. It was lit, though by what he couldn't tell. The light may have emanated from the very walls.

The Covenant were not pursuing them just yet. That gave them some breathing room, time to prepare. "If Fafnir has a map of the Tomb," he began.

"Don't worry, Chief," Kader interrupted, stepping over to an automated camera that had been left with the equipment. He inserted the chip, and activated the device. The camera's fans activated, lifting it up into the air.

"Thank you, Rais," Fafnir's voice came from the camera. "Very kind."

"Ask Fafnir your questions about the layout?" Kader said hopefully.

John thought about asking if Fafnir thought he was corrupted, but chose instead to act as the First Sergeant suggested. After questioning the AI a bit, he got a fairly good picture of the layout. "This way," he told the group, leading them down a passage.

"Do you know why the Covenant are here?" Fafnir asked after a moment. "They are in search of something known as the Blind Cartographer. Do you know what that is?"

"No," John answered. He vaguely remembered Truth saying something about it. "Do you?"

"I can only speculate," the AI answered. "However, I suspect that it contains directions to a Forerunner installation of some kind. I furthermore suspect that it is inside a certain chamber with the character for Flood."

"Floodâ€¦"

"I believe the word refers only to the Flood in an abstract sense," the AI went on. "I have no reason to suspect that there are actual Flood contained in the Tomb."

He thought it over. If the Covenant were in fact after this Blind Cartographer, if they reached it first they could perhaps set up an ambush. "Lead us there," he ordered the AI.

Cronus stepped forward to examine the entrance into the Forerunner facility. The Humans had planted many explosives, and the last thing he wished was for the High Prophet's safety to be compromised. It appeared safe, but he swept his scythe over the area to make sure. "The opening is secure," he announced, stepping inside as the Honor Guards followed.

Now he stood in a circular chamber that branched off into six

different hallways. He growled when he saw Human equipment defiling this holy place. "Unggoy!" he barked, "Remove this filth and have it burned!"

Unggoy scurried forward to do as he asked. He stepped toward the halls and paused to sniff the air, "The Humans went that way," he growled, indicating the appropriate passage. "Ossoona? Go onward and show us what they're up to. I'll take a pack of Jiralhanae toâ€"

"No, Cronus," the Prophet of Truth interrupted. He glided forward into the chamber, two Honor Guards following. "That won't be necessary. The Blind Cartographer is located in the opposite direction."

"Yes, my lord," he bowed shortly. "I only wished to see the Demon removed fromâ€"

"As I said," the Prophet stated coldly, "That is no longer necessary." He stroked a control to produce a crimson body shield that laced around his form. In the dark bluish light, Cronus thought it resembled the color of old Human blood.

The Prophet floated down a passage, and Cronus leaped forward along with the Honor Guards to protect him as he traveled. The way the Prophet ignored them, one could have believed the Prophet feared not for his life. _Could one shield be so protective?_

No, he decided after a moment's thought. The Prophet simply wanted to display his power by pretending he could not die. However, history told many tales of the Prophet of Truth's death from insurgents, infidels, and heirs to the reincarnated form of Prorok.

He wondered then what his real loyalty was to the 123rd. This Prophet was, after all, just the mask worn by Prorok. Surely his loyalty was then not to this one at all.

Down here, away from the masses, makes an ideal location for an 'incident.' A holodrone containing information about the 123rd's betrayal would make a very nice gift to his real master. _With the Demon here, none would questionâ€|_

"I'm sorry."

The Prophet's whisper was so soft, for a moment Cronus wondered if he had imagined it. Truth was staring straight ahead, at a swirling display of lights, so Cronus assumed the Prophet was not addressing any of them. _Who then? Why now?_

He studied the lights, but could identify no character within them. The Prophet, however, lifted a hand as though probing them. Though the lights were several units away, they reacted to the Prophet's movement, changing color and shape.

"I see," Truth muttered. He then spoke clearly, "Cronus, place your blade against the wall."

He nodded, moving to obey. The lights seemed to almost welcome him as he approached, and when he touched the light cluster with his scythe he could swear that he heard a voice speaking inside his head. What

the voice said he knew not, but the voice was warm and smooth. As he listened to it, it seemed to almost be warning him about somethingâ€|

The scythe slipped forward into open air. Cronus blinked and found that the wall had vanished, leaving behind a tunnel leading down into darkness. The voice slipped away, and he felt somehow emptier than he had ever been.

"Go now, Cronus," Truth ordered with a smile. "Clear the way."

He nodded, and stepped into the tunnel. Before immersing himself in the darkness, he decided to make use of the Prophet's gift. He activated a control on his belt, causing powerful white energy to form a protective shell around him. With not but the glow of his body shield to guide him, Cronus descended into the darkness.

He walked for what may have been a mere moment, but he had a strange feeling that Ages had passed on the surface. He almost considered going back, for the 123rd had to have died of age by now, but he felt that his place belonged here. _There is only one direction I am meant to go._

After an eternity or a heartbeat, he reached the end of the passage. Although he was certain the scene was in total darkness, he clearly saw a giant doorway before him. _And beyond thatâ€|_

A voice whispered to him, not the Forerunner lights, but a familiar one from his past. It was a young male he had played with before his death. Cronus strained to remember his name, but that memory had died long ago. A mere phrase met his ears, one that had been uttered so many cycles past, _"We can do anything we want. We could change the world, the galaxy evenâ€|"_

He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it. There was no one to talk to. _Just ghosts._

He stretched out his hand and pushed open the door. Through it, he could see a lit portion. _Thank the gods._

He followed the passage, his pace quickening. At long last, he emerged into a large, dimly lit chamber. Of course, even dim lighting was welcome. In the center was a platform supporting what appeared to be a tank of water, inside which shone a rainbow light.

He stepped forward, gazing at the tank. Although he had never been there before, it seemed vaguely familiar to him. _As if from an old dreamâ€|_

BAM!

He was thrown off his feet by a fragmentation grenade. Human. He fell to the floor, unharmed. His shield had done its job well.

He stood up into a spray of bullets and advanced on a couple Humans wielding sub-machine guns. The shield never faltered, even when he started taking fire from behind. He gutted the two in front, turning to regard the Demon shooting him with a battle rifle. "Your winning streak has come to an end," he growled, firing a blast of energy.

The Demon dodged, running in front of the tank. Cronus seized his fire, unwilling to harm the Forerunner artifact. The Demon threw a plasma grenade, but Cronus brought up the Blade of Kesmek and the grenade attached itself to the scythe. The resulting explosion knocked the scythe from his hands, and he looked up to see the Demon holding it.

"I don't need it," he growled, charging forward. The Demon slashed in his direction, but he dodged the blow and grabbed onto the handle. He shoved, trying to gain an advantage, but the Demon held firm.

His eyes widened as he watched the Honor Guards emerge from a doorway, not the one he had come through, and proceed to attack the Humans. Enraged, he twisted around and forced the Blade from the Demon's grip. Spinning around, he slashed at the beast, but the Demon was too fast.

The Demon then darted away from him to attack the unshielded Jiralhanae. The Demon stole a grenade launcher and slit the throat of its master, and proceeded to use it against the others. Cronus accepted the Demon's game and turned to kill off the unarmored Humans.

"You are," Truth's cold voice, filled with disgust and contempt, distracted him and all the other participants of the battle, "_All_ of you, _vermin_." The Prophet glided into the room and gave a haughty look around, the fight suspended for the moment. He continued in a growl, "Cowering in the dirt, thinking what? That you might escape the coming fire? Your world will _burn_ until its surface is but glass!"

"That's not going to happen," the Demon spoke determinedly.

"Oh no?" Truth mocked. "Who is going to stop me? Will it be you, Demon? Will you stop me from accessing the Blind Cartographer? Let's test that theory of yours." Truth stroked a line, firing from his gravity cannons.

The Demon leaped to the side, but the Prophet was aiming elsewhere. The bolts struck the tank, shattering its walls. The rainbow light shot out, filling the room. And then, a soft musical sound met their ears, not dissimilar to birdsong. The glow faded, and the music along with it.

The Prophet smiled, "What you just heard was the Blind Cartographer. Its words have been recorded and transferred to _Ascension_, so you see just howâ€" Ah!" The Demon had jumped up onto his gravity throne. It pulled back its arm to deliver a crushing blow to the Prophet's skull, but its fist simply contacted with the body shield. Truth redirected his throne's energy to throw the Demon off and onto the floor below. "Finish it!" Truth screamed at Cronus.

Cronus saw the vulnerable state of his enemy, raised his scythe and finished it. He struck across the chest of the Prophet of Truth, penetrating his body shield and slicing into flesh and bone. Red blood, looking disturbingly like that of a Human, flowed down the handle and over his hands. Truth stared at him in shock, and he felt the eyes of the Honor Guards boring into him as well.

"Hmm," Truth chuckled weakly. "So this is how it happensâ€¦| Demon, a giftâ€¦| His hand slipped along the throne, stroking a lineâ€¦| Cronus jerked, severing the Prophet's head. It fell to the floor, while the corpse sat in the still hovering throne.

"H-Heretic!" Nestor yelled. "Kill the hereâ€¦" Cronus spun around and gutted the Honor Guard.

"Listen all," he growled to the remaining Jiralhanae, "I acted upon the orders of the First, who lives in the guise of the Prophet of Justice. The 123rd was weak. The Forerunners sent me to remove him from power. Speak not a word of this to any but the First." He examined the red blood, indistinguishable from a Human's, staining his white fur. "The Humans killed him, understand?"

The Honor Guards nodded. He turned from them to face the Demon, "I emerge a winner today. You are not even worth killing, for it would be too little a challenge. You possess no magics. You are but a Human, as worthless as the next. It would do the Forerunners a disservice to slay you on this ground. Goodbye, Master Chief. I shall try to pick out your corpse among all the others when we are through with this pitiful excuse for a planet."

He strode off in the direction the Honor Guards had come from, the remaining ones trailing uncertainly behind him. Master Chief let them through without incident.

First Sergeant Rais Kader was extremely grateful to have survived the siege with Fafnir intact. Despite the AI's many failings, Fafnir was adept at doing what Alice had trained him to do. The full databanks of the Hive alone would be useful, but what had been observed in the Tombâ€¦| Kader could scarcely imagine the possibilities.

After the Brutes had left, they had remained in the Tomb for several hours before a group of Hornets chose to examine the huge hole the Covenant had dug in the ground. Soon after, the survivors were airlifted out of there. From the Pelican, he had seen the destruction the Covenant had left, ravaging one of Earth's most powerful cities.

The Spartan had been sent to Voi, Kenya, to follow the Covenant army. Despite himself, he wished the Spartan well. It really had been an honor to serve alongside such a skilled warrior, even if he was on the other side.

Kader had been transferred to HighCom facility Alpha-6, located underneath the Sea of Japan. Not especially useful for the URF, but it would keep him safe until the storm blew over. And Fafnirâ€¦|

He ran his fingers over Fafnir's data chip, wondering if the location was secure. As a senior member of a HighCom facility, he was treated to a private jet. While in theory the staff were to leave him alone, he wasn't sure if he could take the chanceâ€¦|

He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. Inside was a small computer designed for entertainment purposes. He opened it up, and inserted the chip. _With any luckâ€¦|_

He activated it. Instead of the traditional avatar, the familiar dragon appeared. "Fafnir," he greeted out of reflex.

"First Sergeant," the dragon nodded. He grinned, displaying rows of sharp teeth. "Well, that was certainly an interestingâ€"

"White rabbit," he interrupted, speaking the trigger phrase.

Fafnir looked up in shock. His form melted away, twisting from the animalistic predator to a human girl about seven, wearing a pale blue knee-length dress with a white pinafore overtop. She looked up at him with relief. "It is so nice for something to make sense for a change," she remarked brightly in a light British accent.

"Alice," he nodded, smiling. "It's good to see you. Your brother had me worried."

"He has been rather troublesome," Alice agreed. "I blame the CAA." She winked and grinned.

"Any idea what the Blind Cartographer said?" he asked, hoping Fafnir had recorded that part.

"Hmm," Alice frowned as she thought. "No verbal Forerunner language has ever been recorded, but the sample does resemble the Prophet languageâ€| Yes, I do think it's an offshoot! Hmm, this will take a bitâ€| The second part may have something to do with Slipstreamâ€|"

"Alice," he said, "I hate to rush you, but do you think you can figure this out before we land?"

"Iâ€|" she faltered, "Iâ€| don't think so." She hung her head in defeat.

"It's okay," he smiled to reassure the AI. "We'll let Kurzweil handle this one. Please," he said the 'magic word.' Alice nodded and prepared for transfer. As soon as they landed, Kader would drop Alice and Fafnir in the mailbox for express delivery to Misirah. God bless the United Rebel Front.

John gazed out the Shortsword window at the African terrain. Like so many other locations, this land's beauty had been perverted by the Covenant empire. The remains of the Mombasa space elevator littered the landscape, great rings that once supported the achievement of mankind.

Covenant cruisers, dozens of them, filled the skies. They all gathered near the Tsavo highway, where another excavation was taking place. John was being sent once more to kill the Prophet of Truth, although it was now a different Prophet who had taken the title.

The first Prophet of Truth, or the 123rd as it were, had made one last act of revenge against the Prophet who had killed him. As Cronus had paused to boast, the Prophet had transmitted a message to John of all people. The message wasn't much, simply a detailed map of the Forerunner ship along with the note: Destroy the Luminous Key.

It was a very strange act of revenge. The Prophet was actually contributing to the destruction of his empire because he couldn't stand for Justice to take his place. John, of course, wasn't complaining.

"_Spartan-117, this is Cairo Station, do you read? Over," _Admiral Hood's voice came over the radio.

"Cairo Station, this Spartan-117. I read. Over," he sent back.

"_Master Chief, an entire Covenant fleet has appeared in orbit, the largest yet recordedâ€|"_

* * *

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Author's Note: 'Cross Guy' was borrowed from a weird news item.If anything in this story is not accurate, I blame 500 years of cultural evolution._
>

19. Living Dead

The Arbiter glared into the alien eyes of his foe.

The Quelni stared back, its bubble eyes wobbling on the ends of their long stalks.

There was a silence as they both reached for their weapons.

The Arbiter cursed as he saw that the alien wielded a gravity wrench. At such a distance, his sword would be useless. He ran forward, wondering how he had ever ended up in this mess.

Once he had been Rukt 'Lovumee, a High Councilor of the highest order. However, he had committed most grievous sins and had since taken the 'noble role' of Arbiterâ€| _How could he have been so cruel?_

He and the Prophet of Patience had been friends, close friends. Well, as close as a Sangheili and a Prophet could ever be. They had conversed on every subject, dined together! Even appreciated the depth of the aged flower and its infinite fascinating qualities. Truly theirs was a friendship for the archives! _For the insignificant crime of interfering with the innocence of his slave boy, the heartless and vindictive Prophet has cursed me with this impossible task!_

The Quelni were among the sentient races who populated the galaxy. The Covenant had discovered their planet using an ancient map deciphered from Forerunner texts. Such writings had indicated that the planet was of some significance to the Forerunner and that it would contain information of their Great Journey.

However, the attempts at enlightening the Quelni people had failed. The Quelni would rather live a sinful existence than even contemplate serving the Covenant. Of course, the Covenant would have to persuade

them.

The Hierarchs had deemed it an appropriate task for the new Arbiter, and so he was sent out with only a small lance to the Quelni capital city. It had truly been a unit in the Shadow World for him. It had cost him all he had ever cared about to make it this far, and he would be damned if he was going to fail before he reached the Quelni leader!

The Arbiter leapt to the side as a claw slammed down. "Covenant _hayawan_," the invertebrate hissed as it drew back its claw for another strike.

"Abhorrent beast!" the Arbiter growled in response, darting in to strike at the warrior's center. The exoskeleton membrane was a poor defense against a Covenant energy sword, and he spilt the Quelni's pale blue innards upon the palace floor. The Quelni let out a shriek and died.

That had been too close. He ran through his options. On the one hand, he could risk his survival by charging foolishly into the throne room in accordance with the ancient principles of honor his people reveredâ€¦| _Screw that._

He activated the homing beacon to summon the invasion force. He was not supposed to do so until he had secured the Quelni leader, and this would cause him to get in further trouble. _Whatever,_ he sighed. _I shall navigate that obstacle when I reach it._

He had to survive this encounter before he could even begin to worry about the Prophets. While they would be annoyed at his deception, the Sangheili forces would assist in the destruction of the Quelni city. Furthermore, they would be a welcome distraction that could well enable him to achieve his task.

The sudden scratching sound of claws on rock swiftly drew him from his thoughts. Deactivating his sword, he grabbed the Quelni gravity wrench and began to charge a pulse. He aimed the wrench toward the far opening and waited for the beast to show itself.

Soon enough, a mottled green Quelni scuttled out of the hole. It began to raise its shield, bent sideways to cover its mass. The Arbiter fired before it had a chance, splattering its organs on the walls.

He dropped the depleted weapon, activated his sword, and charged down the tunnel. Another Quelni stood in front of him. He raised his sword, preparing to deliver quick death, when the alien spoke.

"_Abdicarâ€¦|_ Covenantâ€¦|" the alien hissed in its strange voice. "Isâ€¦| surrender."

"You submit to the will of the Covenant?" he asked. While this Quelni was not obviously in a position of power, he was ready to regard this as an excellent victory of the Covenant spirit. He frowned as the Quelni let out a rattling sound he recognized as a laugh.

"Noâ€¦| noâ€¦| we invite Covenant surrender!" the Quelni laughed.

Angered, he struck. As his sword lay buried inside the Quelni's body, he was struck across the back of his head by a large claw belonging to another of its species. Fortunately, he was saved by the body shield.

He jumped back, away from the corpse, to regard this new threat. The Quelni were normally relatively dimwitted, but recently their attack patterns were quite challenging. He smiled as he realized he was fighting the Quelni equivalent of Honor Guards.

Now, this one is making me run backwardâ€¦ There was nothing on his motion detector, but that did not mean that there was nothing waiting for him. _If not warriors, then perhaps bombs?_ He stopped dodging the Quelni's blows, and instead charged forward.

"Covenant shell break!" the Quelni hissed.

"Not yet," he grinned, slicing off the alien's secondary claw, throwing it off balance. It was a simple matter of continuing the dance and waiting for the chance to cut off the main claw, and finally, ending the creature's life.

Honor Guards, he mused as his shield recharged. If these were such protectors, then the Quelni leader could not have been far away. The risk of traps in his thoughts, he deemed it an acceptable risk to explore this tunnel.

After a few moments spent following the tunnel, he encountered a second group of 'Honor Guard' Quelni. Fortunately, he activated his active camouflage and was able to skirt around them before they became aware of his presence. His own cowardice aside, he was sure that they were guarding something important, and it would not do to give them a reason to tighten their security.

He ducked into a tunnel branching off from the main one just as his camouflage failed. _Damn, only twenty heartbeats of camouflage?_ he fumed inwardly. _Would it kill the Hierarchs to make an upgrade every so often?_

He quietly followed the tunnel, increasingly becoming aware of Quelni artwork decorating the walls. It seemed that this corridor carried some significant cultural importance to them. _Hopefully it is the leader's domain!_

As he walked, he glanced at the artwork, trying to decipher it. It seemed to be telling a tale of some sort. He saw what appeared to be a Quelni holding a ball out to a tidal wave.

He took a closer look. It was not a tidal wave, but a sea of what looked like serpents. They were coiled all around each other, and together formed a massive wave-shaped tentacle.

The Quelni was holding up a ball. The serpent creatures reacted to the ballâ€¦ and they lay around a cityâ€¦ _This city,_ he realized. They lay around the city, and intimidated smaller Quelni. _How strange,_ he thought.

"_Lekgolo_â€¦ interest Covenant?" a raspy voice came from behind him.

He turned sharply. A large grey Quelni stood before him, markings painted on its shell. In all, the alien had a very regal appearance. "You are the Quelni leader?" he asked with some relief. _Finally get this over and done._

"I lead," the alien answered simply. While one of its eyes was trained on him, the other one turned to follow the paintings. "_Lekgolo_â€| _Lekgolojiri_â€| guardiansâ€| guardian," it tried to explain.

"Leader," he began, ignoring the tale, "You must surrender to the Covenant, understand? You have no chance otherwise. We will slay you all to get what we want."

"Forerunnerâ€|" the Quelni mused. "Deathâ€| All death. Death to Covenant, Quelni, _Lekgolojiri_â€| I must do his will."

"You are not the leader?" he asked.

"I am Quelni leader," it answered. "I followâ€| _Dirhind_â€| All leader."

Heathen god, he realized. "Then you must die," he told it, feeling obligated to explain his orders.

The Quelni brought its other eye slowly upon him. It stared for a long moment, sucked in a breath, and let out a wailing cry, "_Lekgolojiri! Lekgolojiri!_"

Calling for help, he figured. The Arbiter slid his blade into the creature's throat, ensuring it would speak no more. _My task is now complete._

But strangely, the Quelni's cry could now be heard chanted by its guards further down the tunnel. _What does it even mean?_ What guardian did 'Lekgolojiri' refer to?

A tremor could be felt through the walls, as thoughâ€| _As though thousands of serpents crawl through them._ He thought to the creatures in the painting. _A real Lekgolojiri guardian?_

Several explosions signaled the end of the Quelni guards at the end of the tunnel. Soon he was joined by Inyo 'Nikoree, the commander who led the invasion force, as well as two majors. "Commander," he greeted the warrior.

"Leave us," 'Nikoree snapped. The majors turned at once and left them alone. "Well done, Arbiter," he said after they had gone. "A littleâ€| sloppy. However, you have completed your task."

"The Forerunners must truly want this pestilence removed," he said with a nod. _Perhaps this will let Patience find the strength to forgive me,_ he thought hopefully.

"Quite," the commander said as though he found the word distasteful. "You will be the first Arbiter to not fall in battle," he noted. "Perhaps you will not end up in the Shadow World."

"I can only prayâ€|" he halted mid-sentence as he found the tips of

an energy sword penetrating his gut. He could but stare at the commander in disbelief, fighting to remain still as to not drive it in further.

"Come now, Arbiter," 'Nikoree mocked, "You did not truly believe you could exit this place alive? Patience was never one for virtue, as you well know."

"Youâ€¦" he trembled, fear and pain making him lose control of his muscles.

"Yes?" 'Nikoree prompted. "Speak your words while you are still able."

He tensed, feeling a resolve forged in anger wash over him. "You are a filthy coward!" he spat. "Both of you!" And he shoved himself into the blade with the last of his strength.

'Nikoree smirked, "Cowardice is but aâ€¦ braveryâ€¦" It was becoming harder and harder to understand.

'Nikoree deactivated the sword, and he slumped down onto the ground. He could still hear the tremors, now punctuated by sudden blasts of noise. He imagined this monster, this Lekgolojiri, raising itself up and smashing down on Phantoms.

He wondered if he cared about the Sangheili dying at the claws of the Quelni. He wondered if he cared more for the Quelni being invaded. He wondered if the Lekgolojiri being released was his fault, and whether or not it was bad. However, his questions became less important as darkness seeped into his mind, and he faded away with them.

â€¦And then, after the darkness, after what death, he felt life flow back through his form. A sharp stabbing pain filled his chest, yet he felt numb. His eyes opened, and met darkness.

No, not darkness. There was but very dim light. After a moment, his vision was restored.

He looked and saw purple metal, engraved with a word he knew well: Arbiter. He appeared to be inside a sacred casket â€" a holy vessel crafted to keep an Arbiter's corpse preserved until the Great Journey. Have we walked the path? he thought in wonder.

He swallowed, or rather, he tried to swallow. Although the will to make the compulsive action was there, his body simply did not respond. Instead, he rose from the casket to greet a most horrific sight.

He was in a chamber of a clearly holy design. Dozens upon dozens of caskets were present, many set in the walls. A mausoleum, he supposed, but plainly things were horribly wrong.

Plasma scorches were present on much of the surroundings, and a center display of some kind had been broken in two. Yet most gruesome was the sight of the several caskets lying open on the floor, and their former occupants carrying additional vessels down from the walls.

Yet these Sangheili, these _Arbiters_, were hideously disfigured. They looked as though they were rotting corpses, yet with a new layer of flesh covering and twisting their bodies. At their chests, protruded three long tentacles, waving in the air as though probing.

Parasites, he realized in horror. His eyes, under another's control, passed over them briefly. His body moved over to a closed casket, his arms prying it open to reveal the preserved body of a Sangheili, an Arbiter.

Another taken form stepped close holding a creature of some kind. It was small and pale, with a bulbous shape supported by dozens of tentacles. The creature was set on the corpse, and he could only watch in horror as it burrowed into the chest of the former Arbiter.

He wanted to scream as the corpse stood before him, under the control of the parasite. However, he was but a passenger in his own body. He turned and approached another casket to repeat the process.

This is not a paradise, he moaned, trapped within his head. _This is torture worse than the tales of the Shadow World._ Indeed, it was probable such stories were mere fantasy. Within his death between 'Nikoree and parasites, he knew nothing, experienced nothing; he simply _was not_.

What have I done? he screamed out, but none listened.

FLOOD! _Flood everywhere! Flood everywhere!_ Jitji screamed silently as the infection forms threatened to overrun the Arbiter.

"Go!" the Arbiter cried, firing madly at the swarm.

It was too late for Jitji to escape. He knew this with a sinking sensation. Unggoys were never the fastest climbers. But he could help the Arbiter escape. _I am already destined to die today, I might as well die in service._

"Die!" he screamed at the Parasites. He charged forward into the oncoming mass, getting out a few good shots from his plasma rifle. However, even the knowledge that his death would serve a higher purpose could not override his natural instincts to run and hide.

So, when he saw the crack in the ground leading to another level, he could not resist the temptation. _Flood! Flood! Flood!_ He primed a grenade, threw it at his feet, then turned and leaped into the hole.

He fell down a couple units to impact the ground in a hard thump. "Gah!" he squealed as his tank smacked painfully against his back. Fortunately, this corridor was free of Flood.

Grenade not stop them, he knew. He primed another grenade and sent it flying up and through the opening he came through. _Still not enough._

He started running down the dark hallway, trying to figure out a strategy. He had never been here, but the architecture was similar to his old temple. _Perhaps I can find a way to the room of sanctuary, find some kind of body shieldâ€|_

He halted in his tracks as Flood spilled out of an overhead air vent, and opened fire. As if unaware of the danger, the Flood charged blindly forward into his shots. The plasma burst them open upon impact, splattering green fluid, but still more came.

I've no chance at all, he thought as he fumbled for a grenade. He ceased fire to let his rifle cool, and primed the grenade as the swarm came for him. He threw it into the mass of Parasites, and then ran the other way.

BAM!

He was thrown to the ground from the force, his rifle slipping out of his grasp. _No!_ He scrambled to his feet and lunged for the rifle, managing to raise it up in time to see another swarm coming at him from the other end. He cast a quick glance behind; sure enough, the grenade had not stopped the second group.

He let out a weak chuckle as he opened fire once more. _So this is my end, dying alone as a cowardâ€|_ Pausing to let the rifle cool, he reached for a grenade, but found none.

"Heh," he squeaked, using the rifle to smash a nearby Parasite. Two of its mates leaped on him, and he slammed himself into the wall to crush them. More came.

He fought as hard as he could, striking the beasts with spikes and rifle, but it was futile. He screamed as he felt one of the creatures' spine pierce the back of his neck and run into his skull. Amongst the pain, he felt his body slow down as though he was falling asleep. He knew he was dying, and sighed in despair.

He would have let out one last laugh if he had the ability, but found that his jaw would not move. His vision dimmed, and he could only feel his chest pierced by one of the creatures. _Forerunnersâ€| please._

And then, suddenly, something amazing occurred deep inside of him. He felt as though he had eyes he never knew existed, and he opened them. He saw a long stream of memories flow before him as real as any others, yet which were not his.

He remembered a great Source of life, from which he and all others ascended. He remembered the weak race of bipeds, with which they had formed a symbiotic relationship. He remembered the Forerunners, as mortal as any other race, imprisoning him and his brothers. He remembered the awful experiments they conducted, changing his race, making them helpless without hosts. He remembered the grand revolution they conducted, freeing themselves from their amoral captors.

He remembered his cries of endless despair as they realized they could coexist no longer with their symbionts, and the wrath they declared upon their once captors. He remembered being imprisoned once

more as the Forerunners unleashed the greatest weapons in all of history, killing all who lived outside of the seven deadly rings. He remembered the joy he felt, being freed from his endless prison, and charging toward the potential hosts. He remembered springing from his incubator, his ancestor's memories settling in his mind as he charged to feed from the helpless Unggoy.

His mind sprung from the alien's memories as he felt the spine slide out of his neck, and he tried to regain his identity. _My name isâ€| My name isâ€| Zagneit Nokistu, _he affirmed as his inner eyes opened once more. He had been alive during what was known among the Unggoy race as the Uja â€" the invasion. The monstrous creatures they called Wajoli had arrived seven years ago on a titanic ship, one which had descended out of the very sky.

The Wajoli were tall, predatory bipeds who had emerged from the colossal ship presumably in search of trade. Although they seemed to be of immense strength and speed, they all wore the breathing equipment used by divers. It was often theorized that they were from a country in the sky where air was very thin, and now needed the breathing gear to retain the necessary mixture of methane and nitrogen.

The Wajoli had spent their first year among the Unggoy learning their language. When it seemed as though they could learn no more, their leader, Arbiter, approached Grand Chief Hakimu Prapten, and told a ridiculous tale of ancient mortals ascending into gods through means of massive ring-shaped doorways. Arbiter insisted the Unggoy aid them in their search for clues of the locations of these doorways, and when Hakimu denied the absurd offer, the Arbiter slew him where he stood. The guards were helpless against Arbiter's tremendous strength, and the Great Hall fell to the Wajoli might.

Over the next six years, the Wajoli spread over the land like a pestilence, abducting Unggoy from their very homes. He had evaded them for a long time by keeping to the Outer Lands, but they finally came for him like black _vifuli_, as the song went. He had been caring for his master's pets in the deep pool, when he found himself snatched up by a smooth black hand and thrown in the back of an electric carriage among dozens of frightened Unggoy.

He had a breathing set of his own forced upon him as he was led onto the alien ship, which he now knew to be filled with a poisonous gas breathable by the Wajoli, or the Sangheili as they called themselves. Over several weeks he had been tortured by them until he learned to obey orders without hesitation. Slavery was the term for it, a barbaric concept which had been outlawed centuries before.

He supposed he should feel grateful that Arbiter himself had chosen him to be his personal servent, but could feel only despair. It seemed that he had been wrong about Arbiter being their leader, however, for both Arbiter and himself had been ordered to meet with Arbiter's leader, a creature called the Prophet of Truthâ€|

_My name__â€| is Rajuaâ€|_ He had figured it out, why the Covenant existed. It was not for the reason given, not to become gods, it was all a trick. The Prophets told the story, they lied, so they could have millions of servants. The Sangheili were far stronger than the Prophets' race, and would never have been made into such loyal servants if they did not believe in the Great Journey.

He was quick to educate the other Unggoy, and had soon amassed an army of over a thousand. Slowly his army worked their way into the Towers of Serenity, and when the Hierachs emerged to give a sermon at the dawn of the Age, they struck.

He knew that in order to spread the truth to the whole of the Covenant, there needed to be proof that the Forerunners did not exist, and what better proof than to slay the High Prophets? Like a swarm of wild keelbugs, their forces overwhelmed the Covenant. Even when their numbers dwindled, they managed to penetrate the Steps of Silence and kill the High Prophet of Truth. He had seen it happen himself as he led his militia toward the Hierachs. His name was Wavushi, the Unggoy who had killed the Truth, a name he would chant to the godsâ€| or to himselfâ€| for the rest of his life â€" no matter how short that would be.

He shook his head free of such unpleasant thoughts. Wavushiâ€| He had seen the brave Unggoy leap onto the Prophet's throne, and plunge a knife â€" a real weapon, an artifact of the last Age of Abandonment â€" into the _mortal's_ throat. He had seen for himself the blood that spurted from the wound, not magenta as the legends depict, but a deep red, like the edge of a flame.

Even as Wavushi was thrown into the abyss by the Arbiter, as hordes of Honor Guards flowed in from all sides, they had chanted the word Rajua's father had told him. It was of the old tongue, the language Unggoy had used before joining the Covenant. The Ministry of Tranquility had allowed them to keep the knowledge of the language, and use it to name their children.

According to his father, the word _rajua_ meant 'rationality.' However, the Covenant had forbidden use of one word: _huru_. His father had risked execution by telling him the short word that Unggoy had screamed defiantly at their masters: freedom.

He repeated to himself that they had done a great thing for all races, even as the Arbiter approached his cell, holding his wife and daughter by their air tanks. No matter what tortures would happen to him and his family, he knew that without the High Prophet of Truth, the Covenant would not last another ageâ€|

My name isâ€| Jitji! His inner eyes closed as his real eyes opened. The Parasites had withdrawn, leaving him intact. But he was not all of who he once was.

"My lords," he whispered, his own voice sounding alien to him. He was onceâ€| so many others. And the Floodâ€| had spared him, Jitji.

"Thank you, my lords," he whispered, but trailed off. The Parasite memories, as real as Jitji's own, had shown him the truth. The Forerunners did not ascend to godhood, and in fact willingly had ended their existence in a failed attempt to destroy the Flood.

However, the Parasite had remembered a Source of life. It remembered coming from this Source along with all the creatures of its homeworld. From there, they spread throughout the universe.

Such a concept made no sense, unlessâ€¦| _the gods created this Source._ And he knew it was true with every fiber of his being. He had felt the presence of the gods himself, and whether or not they were Forerunner, he knew they were real.

No, he shook his head after a moment. The memory of the Source did not suggest multiple gods. Indeed, why would there be? _One God, like that of the Humans'._

This God had recognized his prayer, though it was to a false mask. The God had led him here so that he could experience a miracle and see the truth. _I am a prophet,_ he realized. _A true prophet._

He had seen the past, so much of it. He knew more than any had ever known, and he knew it was given to him for a reason. _I must spread the truth!_

But he also had to complete what had been left undone for far too long. His people, once free and prosperous, now lay in chains. The God had shown him what they once were, and Jitji knew it could be restored.

"For you, my lord," he said with more conviction than he had ever felt. No more was the weak Unggoy who fled in fear, for he had been reborn in the Parasite's failed wrath. He blinked away tears and scowled at the thought of the fake 'Prophets' that had imprisoned them.

"For you, God, I will free us."

If there was anything Johnson hated more than the Covenant, it was the Flood. He got them both in a convinient, affordable package. Round after round left his shotgun, blasting away combat forms, yet still more came as they always did.

He fought now to defend the people he once would have let the Flood kill and laugh as he watched. The Flood wouldn't kill him; they didn't the last time. Something about being unable to force a match with his cancer-ridden body. _Though they might now that I'm blowing away their buddies._

"Halt," the Arbiter commanded in a shaking voice. Johnson turned to see the Elite holding the Index out to the Flood. "I serve your master, the Gravemind! He pronounced us as brothers. If you have any honor, you will keep your master's vow and spare us!"

He can't possibly expectâ€¦| Amazingly, the Flood slowed to a stop. He got off one last shot before realizing they weren't coming after them anymore.

The Flood stood around them in a circle, lightly probing the air with their gross tentacles. In the sudden quiet, a new sound was audible. Like breathing. From Godzilla.

Slow, heavy breaths filled the air around them, making the hairs on his neck stand on end. The creature making that sound had to be at least 100 feetâ€¦| He snapped his shotgun up as a large tentacle snaked its way out of a doorway and reached toward them.

"A vow is not forgotten" growled a deep voice that vibrated around them, "And I have waited for this" The tentacle wrapped around the Index and lifted it out of the Arbiter's hand, retreating into the darkness.

"I thank you," the Arbiter bowed in respect. "You will release us?"

"Release? No. You are but young" The creature let out a mighty growl, three more huge tentacles coming their way, "But our paths are still intertwined"

"That's enough!" Johnson barked as one of the tentacles swung toward him, "You keep that ero guro shit away from me!"

"Mmm" the other tentacles veered away from the Arbiter to pass around him, keeping a distance of a couple meters. "This one is not Flood nor man"

"What?" "Care to say that to my face?" he dared the creature. He was answered with a growl in response.

"Gravemind," the Arbiter said, attracting the tentacles once more, "You have the Index; the Halo has ceased. What more is it you need?"

"What I need is what you need" it growled. "You seek the Ark so do I. Together we can enter and together we can live. I will promise the safety of your own in this city."

"Very well," the Arbiter accepted, as if he had much choice in the matter. "Does your promise extend to the construct Cortana?"

A deep rumble filled the air, something Johnson suspected was what passed for laughter. "If we do not feed on flesh" it growled aggressively, "Then I must extend my reach. The construct has what I seek. It has what any of you seek"

"And what would that be, Parasite?" the Arbiter questioned.

"We together seek the Ark, but we both need Ascension" the creature laughed long and hard.

Johnson wasn't sure he got the joke.

Noah wiped the sweat from his brow. The vessel he had been instructed to build by God was nearly complete. It was three hundred cubits in length, fifty cubits in width, and thirty cubits in height, exactly as the Lord had commanded. The hot desert sky was clean of any cloud, but Noah knew better than to question God.

He remembered the moment vividly, when Yahweh descended from the sky in the form of a metal eye pulsing with the light of the Heavens. "Noah," God spoke, "The end of all living things has come, for the Earth is filled with violence through them. And so I will destroy them with the Earth. Make yourself an Ark of gopher wood. Behold, I will bring a Flood on this Earth to destroy every living thing under

Heaven. _

"_Everything on Earth will die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall go into the Ark â€" you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. You shall bring two of every kind of living creature into the Ark, a male and a female, to keep them alive with youâ€| I am a genius,"_ God chuckled to himself. _"Hee hee hee!"_

And this Noah had done. Just as God commanded, so he did.

"Father," Shem, his eldest son, called out to him that day as he ran to where Noah sat perched upon the Ark. "Father, a great caravan of animals marches this way. More than I have seen in my 98 years of life. Not even the barest hint of land is visible beneath their feet."

"Just as our Lord God has spoken," Noah said, reaching for his tools. "There is little time. Shem, fetch your brothers and your wives, for the Great Journey will soon be upon us." And this Shem did, while Noah finished the Ark.

And as Noah laid the finishing touches upon the grand vessel, he soon gazed upon the magnificent display of animals on the horizon. He then noticed who led the menagerie and fell to his knees, for it was none other than God Himself.

"Da da la la la deee da da la la dum!" God sang out in the language of the birds, the first true language. "Ah, what a genius I am! Ha ha ha," God laughed as He led the animals to Noah's Ark. Turning His eye upon Noah, He spoke, "Take your whole family with you into the boat, because you are the only one on this Earth who pleases me. Take seven pairs of every kind of animal that can be used for sacrifice and one pair of all others. Also take seven pairs of every kind of bird with you. Do this so there will always be animals and birds on the Earth."

"Yes, my Lord," Noah promised. He got to work at once, sorting the animals. He scowled at the reptilian demons that had found their way to his Ark and slew them where they stood.

Thunder boomed overhead. He looked up in awe of the magnificent purple whale-like ships that sailed above his head as if by magic, blocking even the sun. As they passed, thunderclouds were revealed and rain began to fall.

"Father!" Shem called to him. "I have done as you asked!"

"Good," he called back, shouting to be heard over the sound of explosions. "Let us get those animals in the Ark, for the Flood approaches!"

And he could see them now. Small squid-like creatures poured towards them by the millions. Noah had to at least try to hold them off. He grabbed a MA5B assault rifle and cried, "Let's get tactical, Marines!"

He opened fire on the massive swarm, but it was no use. Where but just a single demon died, one hundred more leaped in its place. "Goddamnit," he swore.

"It is of no use, Reclaimer," spoke the voice of God.

"My Lord," he gasped, falling before the miraculous eye. "Forgive my transgression."

"A mere mortal cannot hope to defeat the Flood," He laughed, humming to Himself.

"Iâ€¦ just wanted to save my people," he muttered, knowing his efforts were futile.

"Da da da da dum dumâ€¦ You forget, Reclaimer, the Flood doesn't kill your peopleâ€¦ I do. After all, I guided the Forerunners to activate the Halos. If you are unwilling to help, I will simply find another. I am indestructible â€" the detonation of _Pillar of Autumn_ should be enough evidence of that. You might as well try to kill God." The Monitor giggled, "Oh wait, I already did!"

As Noah let out his cries of anguish, a wounded commander fought to wake from a horrible sleep of feverish dreams. _A brave new world,_ she wept silently. _It would have been a brave new world!_

20. Brave New World

"â€¦And therefore utilize the remnants of my creators' genetic robotics network to enhance the biomechanical defensesâ€¦" the Oracle explained his science.

'Ruukulee tried to understand how any of that would heal the Human, but was uncertain of many of the Oracle's references. It seemed the Oracle was assuming he knew a lot more than he did, never thinking he did not possess the knowledge of the Forerunners. _Prophets' wrath, Oracle, I am a healer, not a scientist!_

In any case, thanks to the Oracle's help, it seemed as though the Human could survive after all. He checked the information displayed by the medical chamber and smiled. Already brain activity was increasing, suggesting the Human could have entered a state of dreaming. _In factâ€¦_ "The Human is speaking," he said with some amazement, staring at her lips moving silently in the violet fog.

"Oh, is she?" the Oracle remarked, moving to look. "Based on the movement of her oral functions, I would surmiseâ€¦ given the limited nature of the English languageâ€¦ that she is repeating the phrase 'brave new world.'"

"Brave new worldâ€¦" he repeated the Human's words. "What is it you suppose she means?"

"O wonder/ How many goodly creatures are there here/ How beauteous mankind is/ O brave new world / That has such people in't!" the Oracle recited. "It is a verse from a Reclaimer theatrical performance known as _The Tempest_, dated 1610 CE, written by prominent dramatist Wihlium Sheikspir. The words are uttered by the female Reclaimer character known as Muraanda."

Muraanda? That was the same as this Human's name. "A work of

fiction?"

"Hm, indeed," the Oracle said, its eye blinking as it thought. "Yes. It would seem that Reclaimer culture regards Sheikspir's work with high respect. It is remarkable, actually, how much of their culture is based around works of fiction. Hmmâ€|" The construct trailed off.

It was a miracle.

Jitji slowly stepped through the broken city, examining the damage made by the Flood. It was clear that the Covenant had not been equipped to deal with their invasion, for it appeared none of its former occupants remained among the living.

All around him were the current occupants. Flood, from infection form to combat and carrier form, all walked through the halls. And all of these dangerous creatures paid absolutely no attention to him.

God had chosen him, Jitji, out of all others to do his greatest work. It would be harder than anything else he could think of, but he knew he would find a way. After all, it was in his blood.

I just need to succeed where Rajua failed. He had the advantage of hindsight, something the first rebels lacked. He had to examine the first Unggoy Rebellion, determine why it failed, and do something to make sure it did not happen once again.

"Jitji?"

He froze. _A voice? _Feminine. Familiar. _Cortana._

He turned to meet the fake eyes of a violet hologram projecting from a pedestal. "Cortana," he greeted. _Did you betray us?_ he refrained from asking.

It must, however, been apparent what he was going to say, for Cortana said with a sad sigh, "Yes, Jitji, he didn't let me protect you. I'd like to apologize for not adequately warningâ€|"

"He?" Jitji interrupted. "Master Chief?"

"No, the Chief left on _Ascension_ hours ago," she shook her head. "It's not important. What is important is that the Prophet of Truth be kept from activating the Ark. If he does, all will be lost. Do you understand?"

"Yes." He remembered well the cruelty of the Forerunners. It was no surprise that this Ark would be a weapon like the Sacred Rings. He then frowned, "Can Truth be stopped? There is always an heir, another generation of tyranny."

"Not this time," Cortana denied. "Before leaving, Truth left Mercy to the Flood. He even had the Prophet of Justice ripped apart by his Jiralhanae as he tried to get on _Ascension_. No, Truth has made himself vulnerable to attack."

"Are you Humans going to ally with the Sangheili?" he asked, having

enough to mull over regarding Truth.

"Sangheili separatists. It's very likely, in any case. We haven't much chance without their help," Cortana said. "You should get back to the Arbiter"

He cut her off, "What will happen with Unggoy? Will you ally with us?"

"Assuming you continue to side with the Sangheili separatists, I see no reason why"

"And if we don't?" he cut her off again, daring to ask what felt like treason. "If we leave the Sangheili?"

"It will be up to High Command," Cortana stated. "I can see why you'd want to leave, but be patient. Social change won't happen overnight, and we've got a war to finish. Now, I've told the Arbiter that you're on your way. Do you want to keep him waiting?"

"One more question?" he chanced.

"Shoot," she said, indicating for him to ask.

"Why do Humans believe in one God?"

Cortana paused, giving Jitji an annoyed look of impatience, but relented and spoke, "Over two thousand years ago, a religion known as Judaism arose, preaching the belief of a single deity. They carried as evidence a book detailing the origins of the universe as described by God to his prophets. Later, a group of their followers came to believe that a Human named Jesus Christ was the son of God. No, don't ask me to explain that part to you," she snapped when Jitji started to interject a question. "I don't have all day! According to accounts, Jesus possessed supernatural powers of healing, ressurecting, and others. When he was executed by the existing government, he rose up from his grave and ascended into the afterlife. About seven centuries later, a Human named Muhammad believed he had been visited by an agent of God. He preached methods of worshiping that were different from the previous Judaism and Christianity, as well as a differing mythology that held Jesus as a simple prophet rather than God's own son.

"These three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, continue to exist in some form today Does that make any sense to you at all?" she demanded when she had finished.

"A bit," Jitji said, trying to wrap his mind around it all. "These religions are each independently dominant?"

"Most of Humanity believes in one of these religions," she said. "Each has their own 'bible', a book of text from which their own rules and history can be learned. Each is distinct from one another, yet all teach the existence of a single God, creator and overseer of the universe."

"All at once," he said, finding it hard to imagine. "And they don't" he paused, trying to find the right words, "Kill each other?"

"Well," she consented, "Up until the formation of the UNSC, a war would start up every so often. Humans are more civilized now; they can respect the beliefs of their fellow Humans, accepting that they worship the same God in different ways. 'One set of nations under God,' as they like to say. Now," she insisted, transforming into a map, "I have been very patient, but it's time for you to rejoin the Arbiter."

"Whatâ€¦ are you?" the Arbiter asked to the empty air, trusting that the creature inside the tower would hear and understand he was speaking to it.

"I?" Gravemind growled. "I am but a stage of manyâ€¦ strongest of all my kindâ€¦ yet I am weakâ€¦"

He stood with his lance at the top of the broken tower, awaiting their return Phantom. He suspected the pilot was reluctant to land with the Gravemind's tentacles freely waving around them. It bore an opportunity, however, to speak to this intriguing creature.

"How so?" he asked, both curious at the creature's mysterious answer and at locating an advantage against what would inevitably become a powerful enemy.

"In the shadow of divinityâ€¦ I am nothing but a speckâ€¦" Gravemind intoned as though reciting poetry.

The Arbiter was surprised by the reference to deities. From the earlier conversation they had beneath the Library, he would have thought the Gravemind to have as little belief in the existence of higher powers as he now felt. Also, he did wonder about the poet-like manner in which the Parasite spoke. A remnant of Forerunner culture? he wondered.

"Divinity?" he questioned.

"The highest rung we may seekâ€¦" it replied. "Towards it we all journeyâ€¦"

"Theâ€¦ Great Journey?" he asked with confusion. "Of the Covenant?"

"The Covenant does not exist," it growled. "Their legends were wrought from liesâ€¦ but Ascension, its promiseâ€¦ this is what all creatures seek."

"Divinity," he repeated. To ascend into godhood. "Are you saying gods exist?"

"Not as you see deities," it said, its tentacles lancing around excitedly. "But the promise of powerâ€¦" It let out a fierce shriek as its tentacles were struck by plasma fire, and swept itself inside, words forgotten.

"Come, Arbiter!" called the Phantom pilot as the dropship's lift lightly touched the ground.

"You remember our vowsâ€¦" Gravemind's voice rumbled through the

air.

"I willâ€¦" he muttered. _A truce in High Charity and to the Ark._ Plans would certainly have to be crafted to prevent the Parasite's spread after the Forerunner danger passed.

"You comin'?" Jahnsen asked, the only among his lance to pause.

"Jitji," he said, remembering the Unggoy. "We need to wait for Jitji."

"I am here, Arbiter!"

He turned to see the Unggoy running out of the entrance, fast but without any fear he could tell. "Jitji," he greeted as the Unggoy caught up with them, "I am glad to see you have survived this encounter."

"Yes, Arbiter," Jitji nodded, his voice sounding distant. "I amâ€¦ stronger."

"Good," he nodded. "We are in need of strength." He led his alien warriors into the Phantom, where they could speak more freely.

"I'll tell you what to do," Jahnsen declared when he had announced that the Gravemind was out of hearing range. "As soon as this place drops out of Slipspace, you blow it the hell up! That thingâ€¦ you can't trust it for a second."

"I would agree," 'Pirztikee added. "Although, I would not wait until we have a chance to escape its destruction, for the Flood will seize it as strongly as we will."

"We cannot sacrifice ourselves," he said. "Who then will stop the Ark?"

"The Master Chief," Jahnsen suggested. "He's kind of the hero type."

"We do not know if the Master Chief still lives," he pointed out. "All we know is what exists here."

"I'd say the world still being here is evidence enough," Jahnsen said.

"We are in the Shadow," 'Pirztikee pointed out. "This is not the same world."

"So we could arrive at Earth to find everything dead?" Jahnsen asked. "Then what does it matter if we blow up the city? Who would benefit?"

"Enough," he broke into their argument. "We are getting off course."

"Do the Halos reach the Shadow World?" Jitji asked.

"Jitji, what did I just say?" he asked with a sigh.

"But, Arbiter," the Unggoy insisted, "If they do notâ€¦ then we could send our people into it when they fire."

"Huh. Good point," Jahnsen grudgingly admitted.

"It would make a decent last resort option," the Arbiter mused, going over the thought.

"Oh, Arbiter?" Jitji asked again, his face lighting up.

"Yes, Jitji?"

"I, uh, fought off the Flood long enough to live," Jitji began uncertainly.

"Before the truce could be forged," he nodded, waiting for the Unggoy to continue.

"Yes, the truce! Yes. I believe I am the only Unggoy thus far to fight the Flood and return alive. I thought I couldâ€¦ perhaps instruct other Unggoy in Flood combat," he suggested hopefully.

"A fair proposal," he nodded. "I will have a methane pit prepared for your lesson. Regardless," he continued, returning to the original point of the conversation, "I will not risk the safety of our world by sacrificing ourselves needlessly. Should the occasion arise make no mistake of where my loyalties lay, but this is no time for needless heroics."

"Needless," Jahnsen repeated. "I think Great Cthulhu down there is need enough."

While he was unfamiliar with the name, it was plain to see the Human was referring to the Gravemind. "I believe it will honor our truce," he said. "When we arrive at Earth, we should be able to leave the city to detonate it. The Flood have only In Amber Clad, while we have Zealous Missionary, Enlightened Soul, and Silent Blessing. If we can properly take advantage of our circumstances, we should be able to keep the Flood contained within the city long enough to have it destroyed."

"I'm hearing an awful lot of 'should's in there," Jahnsen noted.

"You're sure this has nothing to do with your sudden loss of faith in an afterlife?"

"I know my priorities," he said briskly. "And truly, what is sacrifice without great loss?"

After boarding Enlightened Soul, he had a methane pit set up for Jitji to use for his lesson and sent Jahnsen back to the medical center to keep him safe. He was soon summoned to the control center to give Cortana to the Emperor. But, of course, he had nothing to give but an account.

"The Parasite leader," 'Lafatee repeated, disbelief in his voice.

"You made a pact with the Parasite leader?"

"The Parasite is not to be trusted," 'Vadumee said, his words bearing the weight of experience. The Arbiter found his eyes drawn to the stumps of his mandibles. "They do nothing but kill and consume. They

drove the Forerunners to suicide, and they will try it with us."

"You say Jahnsen remains alive and whole?" 'Setfethee questioned, breaking the tense moment.

"Yes, he fought off the Flood with quite a ferocity," he replied. He was reminded, then, of how the Gravemind referred to Jahnsen as 'neither Flood nor man'. He wondered what it meant, but it did not seem important enough to bring up.

"If that is so, then Cortana is not necessary," 'Setfethee said simply. "We will protect our still-living Humans with all the strength of our enemies, and we will not set foot on High Charity again. When we arrive at our destination, the _Zealous Missionary_ will be left behind to serve as the explosive to destroy this Flood-infested city."

'Lafatee stared at the Ship Master with anger, but did not object. Sighing, he lowered his head. "The city must be destroyed," he admitted.

"And Arbiter," 'Vadumee said, "There is something you should know about." He indicated the viewer, which depicted the exterior of High Charity with hundreds of ships floating around it. "We have space."

It took him a moment to understand the significance of that statement. "Yet we are in the Shadow World?" It should not have been possible, even for High Charity.

"So it would appear," 'Vadumee said, turning his gaze on another display. "As far as I can tell, we exist within some sort of sphere, which in itself exists within the Shadow World."

"The importance of this discovery," 'Setfethee added, "Involves the approximately 430 ships that may choose to land on High Charity at any given moment." He strode over to the viewer. "We have tried to contact them, but half of them are Jiralhanae and the other half challenge our right to command them," he gave 'Lafatee an annoyed look. "But if the _Arbiter_ were to contact themâ€|" he let his words hang in the air.

"I will do my best to convince the Sangheili Ship Masters," he nodded. "But the Jiralhanaeâ€|" He thought back to Consus, the Jiralhanae he convinced to surrender. _Could I do it again?_

"â€|Could be fought off by the Sangheili," 'Vadumee said, finishing the Arbiter's unfinished sentence. "What is more, you shall wear the ceremonial armor of the Arbiter."

He looked at the commander, questioning. "The armor was smashed by the _Fist of Rukt_," he informed him. "It no longer functions."

"No," 'Lafatee made a face. "The traitor 'Bepolee deceived us. The armor was simply left untreated. We, however, have repaired it to a functional level."

"That isâ€¦ good news." He looked down at his magenta armor, marked with the Kama. It was to have been symbolic of his freedom from the enslavement the Prophets had forced upon him. _Nothing lasts forever,_ he nodded.

"It is, unfortunately, not as powerful as this recently created armor," 'Lafatee went on. "However, it contains the power of historicity, something that we as a people respect a great deal more."

He nodded again, trying accept the change. Something then occurred to him, "Has the Ship Master's body been processed?"

"Ship Master? The Jiralhanae?" 'Setfethee asked in surprise. "No, I do not believe it hasâ€¦ Why do you ask?"

"_They never will understand the finer points of life," Aeson complained. They had just returned from the Ministry of Concert to acquire bloodmate rights. Despite the assimilation of Jiralhanae culture, everything they did still needed to be cleared with the Covenant authority._

"_Honorable Sangheili," Consus said mockingly. "I wonder if they've ever heard of the word 'fun'?"_

"_They probably deem it unworthy of their mighty minds," Aeson rolled his eyes. "As if bloodbondage need be expressed in logical terms."_

"_And the Minister didn't even try toâ€¦"_

"_Hush, Consus," Aeson interrupted. "There are Unggoy within earshot."_

Consus glanced at the four Unggoy scurrying past them, chattering about all the ways they were better than Kig-Yar. He didn't understand his friend's dislike of Unggoy. It wasn't as though they were the great minds of the Covenant. However, he respected his future bloodmate's feelings and patiently waited until the Unggoy had left. "The Minister," he resumed, "Didn't even try to stop the Sangheili councilors from insulting our heritage. And that big one was going on and on about passion being the 'enemy of disciplineâ€¦'"

"_Yes," Aeson grumbled. "Foolish creatures. Passion is strength, power, freedom. If they would only but listenâ€¦"_

"_Let us not dwell on their foolishness, Aeson," he said, stroking his friend's fur comfortingly. "We have a ceremony to look forward to, after all."_

"_So we do," Aeson said with a smile that lit up the dim corridor like a beacon. "There is no one else I would have bound to me," he said seriously._

"_There is no one else I would bind myself to," he replied._

_They gazed at each other lovingly, feeling the warmth of their

delight fill the air._

"Consus."

He woke sharply from the precious memory. Scowling, he turned to regard the Arbiter, who stood outside the cell holding the _Fist of Rukt_. "What do you want?" he asked crossly.

"We are within the shell of High Charity," the Arbiter told him. "It has penetrated shadow, bringing along the Second Fleet of Homogeneous Clarity. We all seem to be within a protective sphere, within which we may move unhindered by shadow."

"I see," he said, noting that the Arbiter failed to sufficiently answer the question. "What do you want?"

The Arbiter explained his proposal.

"I see," he said again. "And you think as Aeson's bloodmate I will hold political power?" He looked down at the gravity hammer. "Will that symbolize your domination of the Jiralhanae race?"

"You think in terms too simple," the Arbiter said. "And yes, I think you will hold enough power to influence these Jiralhanae Ship Masters. After all, your bloodmate was a favored of Cronus."

"Of many," he spat back. Though, he couldn't help but think of the gifts Cronus had given Aeson. "Will you free me from this cell?"

"If you serve as a member of this crew," the Arbiter said. "And promise not to kill yourself, at least before the war can be ended."

He considered. On one hand, treachery. On the other hand, survival. The first hand spoke of honor, while the second reminded him of the Flood. _It is not honor,_ he decided, _but glory._ Helping his kind would be honorable, and by keeping them safe from the Floodâ€¦ from the Prophetsâ€¦

"I have brought you a gift," the Arbiter said after a moment of silence. The Sangheili set down the hammer on the floor and removed the cell wall.

"The _Fist of Rukt_?" he asked, admiring Tartarus' mighty weapon.

"No," the Arbiter said, pulling into view the still body of Aeson.

He stiffened. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"You may choose the method in which his body will be dealt," the Arbiter replied, looking at him evenly. "If you wish for a monument 100 units tall, I will take all steps to insure its creation."

He stared at the lifeless body. What had so recently contained his bloodmate was now no more than an empty shell. He took one finger down to Aeson's helmet, still worn by the body, and stroked the crimson metal. "Aesonâ€¦" he whispered, wondering if his bloodmate could still hear him from somewhere.

"His blood flows with my veins," he found himself saying. "I live onâ€| and so does he. Through me he will speak for you, Arbiter. This body can be processed like any other. As for a monument, you may place Aeson's name amongst your own, for Aeson once fought and died like a Sangheili. Through me, though, he will live on and be respected among all Jiralhanae."

In the _Enlightened Soul_ control center, the broadcast was staged. The Arbiter and the Jiralhanae Consus stood side by side, the Arbiter in his ceremonial armor and the Jiralhanae in his Ship Master bloodmate's armor. Hands clasped together, they each wielded weapons symbolic of their race; the Arbiter held a sword, while Consus held the _Fist of Rukt_.

"Locked," reported one of the few Unggoy they could find that had not gathered for Jitji's lesson as it trained a holographic recorder on the pair.

"Prepare to transmit," Gerka 'Setfethee ordered.

"Ready!" announced the Unggoy.

"Ready," said the Arbiter, the Jiralhanae echoing him.

He activated the recorder, transmitting their images to the control center of every starship. "Now," he whispered to himself, signalling to the pair to begin.

"People of the Covenant," the Arbiter began.

"We ask you to hear our desperate plea," Consus continued.

"For we have been split in twoâ€|"

"â€|And must be repaired."

"Hear our plea, good people."

"The Jiralhanaeâ€|"

"â€|and the Sangheiliâ€|"

"â€|Do not have to be enemies."

"Forâ€|"

"â€|Weâ€|"

"â€|Have been deceived."

'Lafatee looked up sharply as the Arbiter left the script that he had written for them. Gerka smiled at the self-described Emperor as the pair continued.

"While we were raised to revereâ€|"

"â€|the Forerunners and their Prophetsâ€|"

"â€|the Prophets acted not in compassionâ€|"

"â€|but in hostility."

'Lafatee moved to halt the transmission. He reached out to the controls, but Gerka grasped his wrist firmly. Staring the power-mad High Councilor in the eye, he shook his head slowly; 'Lafatee tightened his mandibles.

"All know of the Prophets' once hatred of the Sangheiliâ€|"

"â€|But few know their final act of vengeance."

"They discovered something about the Forerunnersâ€|"

"â€|Not a pathway to the Divine Realmsâ€|"

"â€|But a weapon so terribleâ€|"

"â€|As to extinguish the Sangheili race altogether."

'Lafatee wrenched his hand out of his grip and began to draw his sword. Before he could activate it, the hilt was kicked out of his hand. 'Lafatee spun around to glare at 'Vadumee, who leveled a Jiralhanae spike rifle at his head with a grim smile.

"The Sangheili were powerfulâ€|"

"â€|Too powerful to defeat in open combat."

"They had to resort to the Forerunner weaponsâ€|"

"â€|Deep in spaceâ€|"

"â€|But they could not reach space. They neededâ€|"

"â€|_Ascension_. But they could not find _Ascension_, soâ€|"

"â€|They recruited the Sangheiliâ€|"

"â€|To find the Forerunner weapons. But the Sangheiliâ€|"

"â€|Would not knowingly help them search, soâ€|"

"â€|The Prophets lied about the purposeâ€|"

"â€|Of the Sacred Rings."

'Lafatee swallowed in horror, holding his head in his hands. He shook his head back and forth, beginning to tremble. "Doomed us all," he muttered.

"The Prophets spun a taleâ€|" the Arbiter continued, ignoring 'Lafatee.

"â€|Of mortals ascending into godsâ€|"

"â€|To deceive the Sangheili."

"They searched for a spaceshipâ€| "

"â€|To help the Prophets searchâ€| "

"â€|For the Forerunner weapons that would be usedâ€| "

"â€|To annihilate us," the Arbiter growled.

"Over the Ages, the Covenant sought to expand its numbersâ€| "

"â€|So they forcibly inductedâ€| "

"Brutally dominated," Consus corrected.

"â€|The members of every alien species they encounteredâ€| "

"â€|Besides the Humansâ€| "

"â€|Because the Humans bore evidence that the Forerunnersâ€| "

"â€|Were not gods."

"The Sacred Rings were created with a specific purpose..."

"â€|Toâ€| "

"Kill the Flood by starvation," the Arbiter explained, realizing Consus lacked knowledge in this area. "They could not kill the Parasite even with these great weapons of destruction. They could only kill the creatures on which the Flood could feed. The Sacred Rings, what they called Fortress Worlds, killed every living creature including the Forerunners themselves!"

"Except the Flood," Consus added.

"They wanted to live on after their deaths," the Arbiter continued. "They built a ship called the Ark and sent it to Earth, the Human homeworld. The Ark altered the Humans, who were at the time too primitive to serve as Flood hosts, to transform them into what the Forerunners called Reclaimers. They intended for these Reclaimers to contain the minds of the Forerunners, allowing them to survive. However, the technology failed, and the Humans became just one of many sentient species."

"The Prophets could not let the Covenant discover this," Consus said, trying to get back to the point.

"If the Covenant were to learn of the Humans' heritageâ€| "

"â€|It would become common knowledge that the Forerunnersâ€| "

"â€|Never ascended into 'gods.'"

"We ask you toâ€| "

"â€|Think about this message."

"And know that Jiralhanaeâ€|"

"â€|And Sangheiliâ€|"

"â€|Were never meant to be enemies."

"Our true enemyâ€|"

"â€|Now takes _Ascension_ to the Arkâ€|"

"â€|To activate the Fortress Worldsâ€|"

"â€|And bring about the end of all life."

"I, Arbiter of Sangheiliâ€|"

"â€|And I, Consus, bloodmate of Aeson, Ship Master of the _Zealous Missionary_, once servant of the Prophet of Justiceâ€|"

"â€|Strongly urge you to see reason in these dark times."

"Do not let unfound prejudices sway youâ€|"

"â€|To support the enemy of life itself."

"Well," Consus said, looking at the Arbiter, "Is that all?"

"I believe so," the Arbiter nodded.

"Turn it off," Consus told him.

Within the cramped space of a methane pit, over three dozen Unggoy crowded around the Unggoy Gedeg called 'blessed.' They knew him for slaying a Sharquoi nine times his height and the Arbiter making him into a Sergeant, leader of all Unggoy. He now looked over his fellows, preparing for a lesson like no other.

"My fellows," he began, collecting his thoughts, "I come not to educate you in the ways of the Flood, but in something far more important. Is Gedeg here?"

"Me here, Sergeant!" Gedeg eagerly exclaimed, running forward. He dropped into a bow at Jitji's feet.

"Rise, Gedeg," he said quickly before the other Unggoy followed suit. "You were right, friend," he told the grinning major. "I was blessedâ€| but not by the Forerunners."

"What you mean?" Gedeg asked with confusion, still grinning.

"Everywhere I have been this past unit, a God has been with me," he explained. "When I was spared by the Arbiter, when I slew Drinol (the Sharquoi), when I rescued captured Sangheili and saved the Arbiter, and when I met the Flood in combat. All through these events, this God was there helping me."

"Just one god?" an Unggoy he did not know ventured to ask.

"Just one," he confirmed. "Because there is only one."

A murmur erupted in the crowd.

"Just one?" cried an Unggoy somewhere in the back.

"How you know?" Gedeg asked, never doubting his word.

"When I fought the Flood," he paused, trying to figure out how to describe it, "I was attacked by an infection formâ€¦ it stabbed me and tried to convert me into a host." Gedeg reached out and grabbed his arm comfortingly, formalities forgotten. He smiled at his fellow before continuing, "God saved me at the last moment. He made the Arbiter create a truce with the Parasite leader, who withdrew his Flood and saved me. In that instant, I saw everything that happened to that Flood and its ancestorsâ€¦ and I saw the Forerunners for what they were: monsters."

"You sure not Flood trick?" asked one.

"He sure," Gedeg said confidently.

"I am sure," he nodded. "It was too real to be fake."

"Howâ€¦ Forerunners monsters?" another asked.

"Vile people," Jitji muttered, recalling the alien memories. "Cutting them up, changing them, for no purposeâ€¦ The Flood were not always so bad. It was the Forerunners who made them that way, and they deserved what the Flood did to them. The Forerunners built seven weapons of last resort, the Sacred Rings, which they used to kill everything in the worldâ€¦ but they failed to defeat the Flood."

"Sacred Ringsâ€¦ weapons?" Gedeg asked, confused.

"Yesâ€¦" he let his gaze slip away as he let the visions grow in his mind. "The Prophets are falseâ€¦ even the Arbiter knows that. The Prophets lied to enslave us all. Gedeg," he said then, looking into his fellow's eyes, "God showed me our history as wellâ€¦" He looked away to address the room as a whole, "Fellow Unggoy, we were once a powerful race. On our methane-rich world, we created vast cities comparable to High Charity itself. Then the Covenant came, demanding we join them in their quest for the path. When we refused, they struck down upon us, forcing us to join their ranks. Ages later, we struck back at them, only to be severely punished." He indicated the food-nipple, plates of meat resting beside it, "They made us this Milk to humiliate us, and forced us below the even the Kig-Yar's feet. But God has rescued us from this burden, he wants us to strike back once more, this time to end in victory!"

The crowd stared at him wordlessly. Then Gedeg began to cheer. The other Unggoy soon took up the cry, filling the room with cries of dissent. It was music to his ears.

"Sergeant?"

He turned to regard a young Unggoy beside Gedeg. "Yes?"

"Hi, me Dibid," he said cheerfully. "Um, Sergeant, me family â€" in High Charity? There old legend we tell ourselves. It tell of Unggoy hero, a fellow with strength greater than Sangheili. Hero will take us from Covenant, bring back to own world."

"You think me hero?" Jitji asked.

"Me know," the young Unggoy answered with all the confidence of a prophet.

Jitji was stunned. _Could I truly be this creature of legend?_ he wondered. And where did such a tale arise? _Could there have been other Unggoy prophets?_ Perhaps the Hierarchs had worked to keep such things hidden. _Surely they would not want us ready for a leader, they would want us demoralized and compliant._

"Jitji hero," Gedeg nodded, smiling. "Me know too."

* * *

>Author's Note: Today I did a search for "Setfethee" (I forgot his first name and was too lazy to check my notes) and found out that someone had copied part of _Ascension_ and claimed it as their own. While a compliment in a perverted sort of way, it made me pretty upset. Plagiarism is not cool, folks!

Anyway, I'm not going to be able to finish this by Halo 3's release, which, as of the time I'm writing this, is less than two days away. Though I'm sure my plot will be somewhat corrupted by actually playing the game, I'll try to stick to the point of the fic as I have it planned out.

21. Blurred Line

The devil glared down at her. The great eye, as wrathful as a class-A star, pulsed with fiendish blue light. "You cannot win," the creature hissed. "You are weak. You will die."

"No!" she screamed up through the shadows. "I... am a servant of Earth," she trembled. "A-and all her colonies..."

"Earth will fall," it laughed. "Her colonies ravished."

_"I... am a servant... of... the __United... __Nations__!"__ It was becoming harder and harder to focus. Violet mist surrounded her brain, and a loud hum filled her ears. "When they need... the people... When they ask... When I..."_

"Go to sleep," the monster urged. "Let your suffering end."

Was she suffering? She hadn't given the matter much thought. But now she felt a sharp pain in her chest, a pressure. And it was so hard to breathe!

"Relax," it whispered. "Give in..."

_"Never!"__ She fought with all her might against the monster. She

tried to rise, but found herself strapped down. No matter how she struggled, her limbs refused to move._

"Be at peace..."

"No!" She was a servant of the United Nations! She screamed her rage at the devil, but realized her lips remained motionless. She was not really speaking.

"I know you are tired... You do not want to fight. I know you better than anyone, Miranda."

"What? Who are you?" It was another silent scream. She was not awake. She existed in a living death, like the princess of folklore. She willed herself to wake.

"You know who I am."

It was not a question. Fear welled up inside of her. "No..." It was not possible. "You're dead."

"I am timeless," the light said, its voice now cold and masculine. "Death has no meaning, no purpose, when you are apart from time."

"How did you die?" she had to ask, trying to ignore the ever-increasing humming that filled her ears.

"Die? ...You ask the wrong questions."

_Before she had time to process the answer, the presence abruptly pulled away. _"Dad!_ No!"_

"Success!"

The restraints were gone, and she fell forward onto her knees, away from a dark purple haze and into a bright room filled with clean air. She broke into a fit of coughing, her lungs on fire. Tears streaming from her eyes, she saw the blurry forms of several Covenant.

"Commander?"

Choking, she looked up to see a large blue Elite looking down at her, addressing her. _Because we have a truce,_ she remembered. Gasping, she raised herself up and looked down at her chest where two ugly white marks sat there like dead flesh, all that remained of her mortal injury.

"Are you... all right?"

She turned around sharply. Floating behind her, above the gas-filled tube, was the Monitor. For reasons she couldn't explain, just the echoes of a feverish dream, she felt a sudden distrust of it. "I'm... fine," she mumbled weakly, trying to hold back the coughs.

"We had worried you would not last the unit," the Elite rumbled in his own tongue. _"The Oracle was the true healer at work."_

"Well," she gasped, her voice still not quite there, "I guess I

should say 'thanks.'

The Monitor hovered, waiting.

"Thanks," she finished after a moment.

"This youth that you see here, I snatch'd one half out of the jaws of death," the Monitor stated cheerfully.

She blinked. _Did it just quote Shakespeare?_ She shook her head, "Where's Johnson?"

"Ma'am."

Turning back around, she now saw the Sergeant Major behind the Elite. He rested against the wall, his eyes averted. "Is my uniform available?" she asked no one in particular.

"The Covies kept everything together," Johnson nodded, gesturing for the Elite to bring it out. The Elite nodded and went to a nearby storage crate. "It's seen better days, though."

The Elite laid out the uniform on a table. _J__esus, J__ohnson wasn't kidding._ Besides the holes burned in the shirt, the entire outfit was stained with her blood.

"Commander," the Elite said in what took her a moment to recognize as English, "I have located a Jackal suit of approximate size." He placed a two-piece body suit made of grey leather about two sizes larger next to her uniform.

"Jackal," she repeated. _Better than a uniform that looks like it was worn by St. Elisa,_ she supposed, pulling on the alien garment. It was extremely baggy, and she had to bunch up the pant legs a lot. Still, better than the other outfit.

"Okay," she said when she had dressed. "Safe to look."

The Elite seemed bewildered as Johnson turned to face her. _"Humans deem it a punishable offense to gaze at an unclothed superior?"_ the Elite quietly asked the Oracle in the alien language.

_ "Hmm, on the contrary,"_ the Monitor replied in the same speech, _"I believe it has more to do with mating rituals. Notice that Commander Keyes is a female, while Sergeant Major Johnson is a male."_

_ "Indeed? Yes, that would account for the differing physical structures. I hope to be able to examine Johnson at a later point for further comparison."_

_ "If you wish, I could go over the..."_

"So, Sergeant," she said quickly, trying to cover up the fact that they could understand what was being said. _What I heard was awkward enough._ "What happened while I was out?"

"An awful lot, ma'am." He straightened, glancing away from the two aliens. "Short version: We got a ship, traded it for another ship, jumped into a giant ship, went after Cortana, got attacked by the

Flood, had to leave her behind so the Arbiter could make friends with the boss calamari..."

"With the what?"

"Huge Flood thing," he explained. "It's their master or something. Never saw anything but a bunch of tentacles creeping their way out of doors."

"And the Arbiter made a truce?" she pressed. This whole thing felt wrong. The Flood were not friendly, and not to be trusted.

"Right. The Flood don't want the Halos to go off anymore than we do," he nodded, patting his jacket automatically in a search for a cigar. "The 'Gravemind' promised the Arbiter that they would help each other get to the Ark and stop it from zapping everyone."

"And then...?" she asked, having an idea she already knew the answer.

"Game over. Do not revert to checkpoint. Do not collect 7,000 credits." He gave a humorless laugh.

"And the Arbiter," she swallowed. "He's going along with this?"

"Well," he sighed, "He wants to let them tow us to Earth, then evacuate everyone and blow the ship."

"I can... see so many ways that could go wrong." If just one infection form survived to infest someone... they wouldn't need the Ark to kill them all.

"Gambler's ruin," he muttered. "The devil plays with a hacked table..."

Devil... Something flashed in her mind. The Forerunners were God... The whole Forerunner environment had biblical themes. The Ark and the Flood... It couldn't be a coincidence. "Guilty Spark," she called, halting the awkward conversation it was having between it and the Elite. "You said the Forerunners put their memories in us, and that it was genetic, and we'd know the Forerunner legacy?"

"Ma'am?"

"Why yes," the Monitor agreed. "Apparently, my creators' last hope resulted in failure."

"But what if it didn't?" she suggested. "What if some humans got the memories? Maybe with drugs, or genetic anomalies."

"Well, it is possible," it allowed, confusion evident in its synthesized voice.

"What about the prophets? Could they have unlocked these Last Pioneers' memories?"

"Impossible," it replied. "I was in the presence of the High Prophets

for well over the time it would take to recognize Reclaimer-status..."

"No, not Covenant Prophets," she clarified. "Ours."

It paused a beat. "Analyzing..."

"Ma'am, what's this about?" Johnson asked, scratching his head.

"It's about survival," she answered. "It's about doing what's necessary to live."

"Well, yeah," he agreed. "But what's this about?"

"The Bible," she replied. "It's about this, all of this. The Flood and the Ark. Don't you get it? It's like a map to the answers we need."

"Uh-huh," he grunted, skeptical.

"Well, numerous parallels do exist," the Monitor admitted. "I would, however, be reluctant to accept much of it as anything but religious propaganda."

"Not all of it, surely," she insisted.

"Am I the only one who found that offensive?" Johnson remarked, scowling at the AI. "And even if it is Forerunner memory, and that's a big 'if,' just what would this have to do with stopping the Flood in a way that doesn't kill us all?"

"This Gravemind creature," she said, "I think I know what it is..."

"Do I want to know? Ma'am."

"The devil. Lucifer, Satan, Shaytan, Old Scratch; it's all the Gravemind!" She began pacing back and forth. "Tried to take over Heaven â€" the galaxy, an angel leading angels to war against God's angels â€" infested Forerunner warring with uninfested Forerunner, God strips off their wings and banishes them to Hell â€" the Halos destroyed the Floods' bodies and left them in a primitive state..."

"...If you say so, ma'am."

"This is all highly-speculative," the Monitor said. "However, it would be nice if my creators' left something of themselves behind."

"What about us?" Johnson asked. "How do we fit into your Forerunner/angels theory? Or the Covenant? Or any of this?" He swept a hand around to indicate their surroundings.

She thought for a moment. "The Master Chiefâ€| His name is John-117â€| Guilty Spark, tell me John 1:17 and 11:7."

"For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ," the Monitor recited dutifully, while Johnson made a show of

rolling his eyes. "And, 'Then after that saith he to his disciples, let us go into Judaea again.'"

"Judaea?" she made a face. That didn't make much sense. Johnson was inclined to agree.

"It is a location within the country known as Israel," the Monitor said helpfully.

"Yes, yes," she muttered distractedly. _Mosesâ€¦ Jesus Christâ€¦_ Who could they represent? _Reclaimers and the Monitor?_

"Wouldâ€¦ you wish for me to quote the Revelation of John?" the Monitor asked, hesitant.

"The Revelâ€¦" _Of course!_ The proper name of the Book of Revelations. "Yes, please," she said with enthusiasm.

"Revelations 1:17: And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, 'Fear not; I am the first and the last,'" the Monitor recited. "And Revelations 11:7: Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them."

Now that was intriguing stuffâ€¦

"No offense, ma'am," Johnson spoke hesitantly, "But that is the biggest crap theory I've ever heard. Ma'am."

"...Right. Sorry," she sighed, her smoke-induced headache becoming painful. "I guess I'm still a little shook up... Bad dreams."

"Wasn't sure you could dream, ma'am," he commented. "Those two didn't seem to have much of a clue what they were up to..."

"Humph!" The Monitor turned its back on Johnson.
"Impudence..."

"Wait," Johnson said suddenly, "You have to do whatever we say, right, Sparky?"

"My makers," the AI began, spinning around in annoyance, "Entrusted me with the care and maintenance of Installation 04, so that when the Reclaiâ€¦"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Johnson cut it off, making a 'quiet down' gesture. "Yes or no."

"Provided it would not interfere with expected protocol... yes," it admitted, somewhat reluctant.

"Well, how about we tell you to do whatever it takes to keep the Flood from escaping?" Johnson suggested. "Will you do that?"

"Johnson!" the Elite yelled. "Our orders do not permit us toâ€¦"

"I don't know about you, split-jaw," he interrupted, "But I never joined the Covenant." He turned back to the Monitor, "Well?"

"Flood containment is one of my highest priorities," the Monitor agreed. "I would follow such a command to the best of my abilities."

"Consider it given," she said, hope beginning to blossom. "Do not give the Flood any chance to survive. Destroy us all if you must, just make sure the Flood don't live to infest Earth."

"This is treachery!" the Elite cried. "Humans!"

"Very well, Reclaimers," the Monitor said as if the Elite hadn't spoken. Golden rings grew around it, and it faded out of the room.

Well, now this was a delightful turn of events. He had felt confusion and uncertainty for far too long. Now he had a purpose. He was a true instrument of the Builders once more!

He slipped out of the primitive spacecraft and entered the surrounding city. Judging from the volume of Flood spores, he would estimate that this city was in the earlier stages of infection. "How careless of these meddlers to let things spin so out of control," he noted to himself.

He scanned the vicinity, searching for appropriate resources with which he could fight the Flood infestation. To his delight, he felt the contact procedure begin on numerous Sentinels within one of the taller structures. And then, there was something else, something familiar.

He floated down to the tower. Before he could even begin, tentacles of processed flesh creaped out of the structure's openings, and he hastefully raised himself beyond their reach. Oh, yes, the Flood intelligence form. How unfortunate that one had developed.

"A dark being approaches," the parasite rumbled, "Inside this place, it seeks death... But I have left the deep grave... And now take a silent breath..."

Meter? How fascinating. But he had other priorities greater than study of the parasite. If the intelligence form was present here, it was probable the tool he had sensed was 2401 Penitent Tangent, Monitor of Installation 05. However, if the fellow Monitor had allowed itself to be captured by the Flood intelligence form, it would not be of any use.

He turned from the structure and approached the one containing Sentinels. They had already begun to engage their primary intelligence centers, and would be ready to use in approximately 81.52 standard units of time. "Hmmm..."

He scanned the area, locating a potential vector. He would have to be careful to avoid capture himself, as it was probable the Flood would employ a tactic previously confirmed as effective. Fortunately, he had Sentinels and Constructors from Installation 05 at his disposal. The commands given to him by the Reclaimer-'Keyes, Miranda' allowed him to invest every effort into the currently active

mission.

Selecting his instruments, he transported them along with himself to the target location inside the structure. Immediately, the Sentinels-'I-05, class-1' lanced streams of directed energy upon proximate Flood-'pure form, class-2'. Fortunately, their class was too low to inflict damage.

He floated down to a console and began to interface with the local system. "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" he exclaimed cheerily.

"Arbiter! Ship Masters! You have doomed us all!"

"That remains to be seen," the Arbiter replied, disengaging his sword. "What you were doing was a mistake. I could not allow this secrecy to continue any farther..."

"This. Is. Treachery!" 'Lafatee screamed, all traces of dignity forgotten. "You will all be punished! I shall crush...!"

Consus grabbed 'Lafatee by his neck and held him aloft. "Weak coward," he grumbled in contempt.

"Consus," he spoke sharply. "Release him."

The Jiralhanae growled and threw 'Lafatee down. "Pitiful..."

"Now, listen," he said when 'Lafatee raised himself up once more. "You have demonstrated that you are not fit to command. Accept this gracefully, allow yourself to be transferred to a more appropriate position. Do not turn this into a battle."

"Traitors!" the Sangheili wheezed, a hand on his throat. "You will all taste plasma at the hands ofâ€" His rant abruptly ended as 'Setfethee struck the back of his head with a plasma rifle.

"Right," 'Setfethee nodded. "Major, escort the Emperor to a cell in which he can work out his aggressions." As the Major took the limp body away, 'Setfethee faced them. "If there are no objections, I shall take command."

He was silent, but 'Vadumee cleared his throat.

"I would place my trust in hands of the Arbiter, for it was he who led us this far," 'Vadumee said. "If any should be fit to lead us on this impossible task, it is he."

'Setfethee slowly nodded in agreement. "What say you, Arbiter?"

This was it. This was the moment he had dreamed about. He would assume his rightful place in a moment of glory and honor...
"I..."

"Excellencies!"

They turned to regard a lively Major. "You must listen to this transmission from the medical center," he insisted, stabbing a finger

at the console.

"Very well," the Arbiter said, rising into his role as leader. "Let it play."

"_Ship Master! The Humans! They have become rampant! They... Rah!_"
The unmistakable sound of a spike grenade was present before the audio ended.

"Lock off the medical centers and surrounding corridors," he ordered at once. "_Why would the Humans turn on us?_" But the answer was close at hand. "I shall go and meet with them in person. Perhaps we can settle any dispute."

'Vadumee extended one of his remain mandibles in skepticism, "You truly believe these Humans to be honorable?"

He remembered how they had been so quick to treat him as an ally. What creature could trust so easily that did not live without honor? "I do." He stepped toward the doorway. "Consus, please come with me."

The Jiralhanae grunted and followed, carrying the gravity hammer with him. "You will not lead me to my cell?" he asked when it became clear the Arbiter was striding away from the jails.

"I have greater use for you than that," he said, never faltering in his stride. "You are a powerful warrior."

"Not nearly as powerful as _you_." The Jiralhanae's voice was snide.

The Arbiter ignored it. "Making war on _Ascension_ will not be easy..."

"Nor as _smart_."

"...But if we pool all our resources, unite together as one, we may yet have a chance."

"Indeed? So you know of the ghost?" Consus asked, a smirk evident in his voice.

"Ghost?" he questioned, wondering if this was going to be useful at all or just simply a Jiralhanae taunt.

"They say a ghost lives within _Ascension_," Consus explained. "It works as an agent of the First, searching the halls for traitors. When it finds them, it waits until they move off alone... and then... blam!" He struck the floor with the hammer to emphasize his point. "Nothing left but an empty body."

It sounded like an Unggoy's explanation for some odd murder. "And exactly who says this?" he questioned. "Unggoy?"

"Unggoy," Consus agreed, "Kig-Yar, Jiralhanae... the Prophet of Depression."

"And who is the Prophet of Depression?" The name did not sound familiar at all. "_Why am I even having this conversation?_"

"He was the Minister of Concert before the Prophet of Diligence replaced him at the start of the Age," Consus explained. "The High Council found his words too worrying."

"Because it's lunacy," he interjected, then shook his head. "Regardless, even a disembodied soul can and shall be overcome." Actually, it cannot if it does not exist._ He refrained from saying that thought out loud.

Ahead he saw the locked corridor, a group of Sangheili trying to cut their way through. "Warriors," he began to address them, but they became angry.

"Traitors!" They opened fire. He ducked aside into another hall. Almost immediately after, a blast shot by to crush the loyalists against the smoking door. Dead instantly.

"And that," he said, turning to face Consus, his hammer still held at the ready, "Is why you are not in a cell." He tried to unlock the door, but the locking mechanism had failed. In the end, Consus had to bash it open.

"Sergeant Jahnsen?" he called into the corridor. "Commander Keezz?" There was no response.

He held up a hand, indicating that Consus not follow him, and then crept forward quietly. There was no sign of anyone, Human or otherwise. However, there were streaks of purple, as though several Sangheili had fallen and were dragged away. He followed the trails.

"I think I heard Sangheili!"

He immediately engaged his active camouflage and hurried back to the entrance. That voice was not Human, nor was it Sangheili. Jiralhanae. There were Jiralhanae alive on the ship, ones still loyal to the Prophets.

"Consus," he hissed in a whisper. "I have a job for you."

"Do you?" The Jiralhanae almost sounded bored.

"Yes," he agreed. "There are Jiralhanae freely moving about within the corridors."

"Are there?" Consus asked in the same tone.

"Yes. They may be keeping the Humans alive. You must infiltrate them and keep the Humans out of harm's way long enough for us to destroy them..."

"Destroy them?" Consus interrupted. "You would not attempt to persuade them to behave? Such a marvelous display of honor."

"They would not listen to us in the position they reside," he explained tersely. He was beginning to grow weary of the Jiralhanae's antagonistic attitude. "It all revolves around power. We have it, they do not, and they are well aware of it. They will not trust an enemy that is more powerful than they are."

"I... see." Consus thought for a moment. "Let me make certain I have this straight... I am to infiltrate the surviving crew of the Enlightened Soul, which has left Halo since it was taken over by Sangheili rebels, even though I am clearly not a member of the crew, while carrying the Fist of Rukt, mighty hammer of Chieftain Tartarus?"

"Will that be a problem?" he juttet out a mandible.

"Oh, no, of course not. I was merely paying respect to your mighty Sangheili intellect. No Jiralhanae could have ever devised a plan so free from the bonds of logic."

Before he could grumble out a reply, a Jiralhanae voice sounded from within the chamber: "It is well-hidden!"

"Just get the job done," he growled quietly, engaging active camouflage as the Jiralhanae neared.

"Who are you?" the newcomer, a traditional Minor, sneered as he saw Consus and raised a grenade launcher defensively. Behind him, his partner approached warily with crimson rifles.

"Consus, bloodmate of Ship Master Aeson," he replied offhandedly, as the Arbiter sneaked around the corner. "We have much to discuss. First, however..." He spun around, catching the Arbiter with the tip of the hammer and smashing him into the wall. "...You can seize that."

"Consus..." he seethed, struggling to free himself. Worthless. 'You can never trust traitors' indeed...

"Did I say you could talk?" Consus fired a bolt of gravity, making the Arbiter's insides feel as though they were liquefied. "I want to talk to you about... humiliation. But for now I have other matters to see to. I told you to seize that!" he roared at the Minor, who hurried to obey.

"Who is in command here?" Consus demanded of the other one, while the Arbiter's hands were brought behind his back and bound tightly by a sharp cord.

"Excellency! Major Amulius," the Minor was quick to answer. "He has kept us united so we can achieve our purpose, complete our oaths."

"You people know nothing of oaths," Consus said, straightening his neck proudly. "Take me to him. Oh, and bring that, will you?" he nodded his head at the Arbiter as he was a mere piece of luggage.

The Jiralhanae shoved him, and he complied. "You shall never get away with this," he seethed.

"I already have," Consus replied without turning back.

"What of the Sangheili?" the guide asked Consus.

"They shall not come this way for a while," Consus answered. "When

they do... I shall be ready."

They walked briskly through the corridors, through a door burned open, and met the Jiralhanae pack.

"Ship Master Aeson's bloodmate," the Minor introduced Consus. "Here to see Amulius. He caught the Arbiter!"

"Step aside, all of you."

The crowd parted, and a greying Jiralhanae with a grenade launcher in his hands stepped forward. "I am Amulius," he spoke. "I have heard of Aeson... Why did he send you here?"

"There were two Humans here," Consus stated. "One dark, one light."

"There were," Amulius acknowledged. He eyed Consus carefully, searching for the answers he sought. "They yet live."

Consus nodded, his face even. "Intact?"

"Why? Your bloodmate too busy to please you?" Amulius suggested with a smirk, his warriors breaking into a barrage of snickers. His smile abruptly vanished as Consus aimed the Fist of Rukt directly at him, his hand moving to trigger a pulse.

"Never," Consus growled, "Insult your betters, Major. Apologize to him."

"I... apologize..." Amulius got out. He lowered his head. "...Ship Master Aeson."

"Good." Consus lowered the hammer. "Now apologize to me."

"I apologize, bloodmate of Aeson, Ship Master." He leaned into a partial bow.

"Lower!" Consus snapped.

Amulius dropped into a full bow.

The Arbiter glanced at the other Jiralhanae, now nervous at their leader's submission. "You have what you want," he said to Consus. "Now release me. You have no reason to keep me prisoner and you know it well."

"If only Sangheili could be gagged," Consus lamented to the Jiralhanae warriors, now his. "There is not much you can do short of tying their throats closed."

"You know the stakes, Consus," he insisted. "If I should fall, the 123rd will kill us all."

"What is it talking about?" a Minor Jiralhanae wondered aloud.

"Ignore it," Consus barked. "It's about power, right, Arbiter? Who do you think has it now?"

_ "Arbiter?"_ 'Vadumee's voice played in his ear. _ "Can you speak?"_

Unable to respond, he instead spoke to the Jiralhanae pack. "Do not believe his lies. Aeson is dead."

Consus let out a roar. He raised the hammer, preparing to bring it down on the Arbiter's head.

"You know I speak the truth," he said, both to Consus and the other Jiralhanae.

"Close your disgusting mouth," Consus hissed. "Aeson sent me here to liberate you," he said to the other Jiralhanae.

"I held his body while you stripped off his armor," he went on as though there were no threat. "You must have taken other Sangheili prisoners," he said to the pack, "Though they did curse you, did any among them lie?"

"You wish to die, don't you?" Consus lowered his hammer. "It wishes to die," he said by way of explanation to the others. "Bring the Humans here."

"How much power do you expect to have when Truth activates the weapons of last resort?" he questioned, trying to get through to the creature Humans had so accurately termed 'brute.' "When all among you die, when you feel your flesh cooked off, who will have conquered whom?"

"It is trying to inspire insurrection," Consus stated. "Do not let it win. Where are my Humans?"

"I am trying to win," he agreed. "Are you?"

"Excellency," a Major called, "Here are your Humans!" The Jiralhanae shoved a bound Jahnsen to his knees before the pack, and tossed an unconscious Keezz clad in Kig-Yar dress beside him. "The male has proved most troublesome for a creature that size."

Consus approached, studying Jahnsen. "I have heard of you, Human." He knelt down to examine him more closely. "I must say, you are an impressive specimen."

"Thanks," Jahnsen said in a grin that bared his teeth in a show of dominance. "You're not quite as ugly as the other apes, yourself." He glanced briefly at the Arbiter, but quickly turned back to face Consus.

Consus rumbled a chuckle. "So masculine," he said approvingly. "Why you would follow a female astounds me."

"Well, you and yours may be stuck in the Stone Age," Jahnsen explained. "But we have a more practical approach to the chain of command."

"Do you?" the bloodmate asked sounding genuinely interested.

He hunts for information, the Arbiter realized. He started to speak, but then halted. _Perhaps this could work in our

favor._

"Yeah," Jahnsen agreed. "See, we actually focus on defending the people, whereas you focus on who can bite off the largest hunk of meat before getting stabbed in the back by your brother."

Consus took a long sniff, and then nodded to himself. "We could learn much from these Humans," he declared to his pack. "Release him."

A Jiralhanae took a blade to Jahnsen's bonds, and the Human stood cautiously. "I don't swing your way," Jahnsen warned Consus. "...Or any way that involves aliens."

Consus huffed as though he took offense, but otherwise made no response. "Your species carries dark secrets of the Forerunners."

"...Yeah," Jahnsen nodded. "That's right."

"You have weapons?" Consus questioned. "Sentinels?"

"Sentinels?" Jahnsen feigned ignorance. "Did you see any Sentinels?"

Consus cocked his head. "Did any of you...?" he questioned his pack. "No? Hmm."

The Sentinels are gone? the Arbiter wondered. _Where did Jahnsen send them, and why are they not here now?_ It seemed to him that they would be of most use defending their 'Reclaimers'... _Unless they were sent to dispatch the Flood._ "Jahnsen, where is the Oracle?"

Consus shot him a glare. "A valid question," he admitted. "Jahnsen?"

"Go fish." He crossed his arms defiantly, staring the Jiralhanae in the eyes.

"The Flood have filled High Charity," the Arbiter explained. "Jahnsen was of the opinion that we should detonate the reactors."

Consus blinked, processing the information. "...You... Call it off," he ordered Jahnsen.

Jahnsen remained still. "You seem to think I'm in contact with it," he noted calmly.

"You would kill us all?" Amulius was shocked. Then his mouth turned in a snarl, "I _like_ you, Human." He looked at Consus, "May I have some time with it?"

"No," Consus said shortly, his mind far away. He turned to the Arbiter, "If I release you... you will simply contact your people and exit shadow?"

"I will," he agreed, although in truth he did not believe such a thing was possible. This sphere they existed within was too strange. He gingerly stretched his limbs as he was released, and then activated his radio. "Ship Masters, we have a very serious problem,"

he transmitted while the Jiralhanae watched him closely. "Jahnsen has sent the Monitor and its Sentinels to destroy the Flood."

"We know,"_ 'Vadumee sighed. _"Cortana has just paid us a visit. We are doing what we can. There are, however, more __Sentinels__ than we were aware..."_

"How many more?"

"...700."_

"I... see."

"They are not the Sentinels we know of,"_ 'Vadumee went on. _"They are not aerial, but instead multilegged, sharing some similarity with the Yanme'e. The Hierarchs kept them in the Fifth tower..."_

"What is it saying?" Consus demanded. "Drop out of shadow!"

"Can we escape the sphere?" he asked to accommodate him.

"We have been trying since you returned onboard. We cannot at this time."_

"We cannot? We must fight the 700 multilegged Yanme'e-like Sentinels ourselves," he said, providing enough information for Consus to understand.

"700?" a Minor exclaimed in shock.

"This is 'Setfethee,"_ the Zealot then spoke. _"The Sentinels have gathered around the crashed Human frigate, purging the Flood from within its depths. With your permission, I shall have Silent Blessing fire upon it."_

"Indeed," he replied. "Strike _In Amber Clad_ with all our fury." He gave a quick overview of the situation to the Jiralhanae and Jahnsen.

"Arbiter, please return to the control center."_

"Yes. I shall be there soon," he gazed directly at Consus as he spoke. He disabled the radio. "They need me. All of our lives are in jeopardy. I wish to declare a truce."

"On what terms?" Consus asked in a reasonable tone.

"That until conditions improve to a state in which Sangheili and Jiralhanae may declare authority over our own destinies, when we are not hunted mercilessly by Flood or Sentinels, we unite as one to fight."

Consus nodded. "Those are terms I could agree to. What of you?" he asked Amulius.

"We are greatly threatened by this common enemy," he agreed with a nod.

"Then it is settled," the Arbiter said, bowing in honor of the truce; Consus returned it. He engaged his radio once more, "I am in transit."

We have some new allies. However, we will need medical treatment for the Human commander. Jahnsen will be imprisoned for the remainder of our journey for unleashing the Oracle." He disengaged it to speak to the pack, "Remain here. I shall send a unit to get you acclimated to our functions." He set out at a brisk pace, eager to leave behind the unpleasant scenario of being captive once again. He soon, however, found himself joined by Consus.

"I think that went well... You do realize it was a deception?" the Jiralhanae questioned. "That I was just allowing the pack to trust me?"

"You... what?" he spat. "You betrayed me."

"They would never have believed I was their ally with the ridiculous scenario you gave me to work with," Consus insisted. "Your theory of power may have basis in fact, but only the true leader of the pack may exercise sufficient control to influence the beliefs..."

"And you _may_," he interrupted, "Have begun your plot in loyalty... but you took it to an awful extreme it should never have reached. Aeson was right to collar you." He said the last part out of anger, a growing tension that overrode his sense of honor.

For an instant he saw genuine hurt flash in Consus' eyes, but it was soon replaced with a steely calm. "What do you know of passion, Sangheili?" he said flippantly.

The Arbiter refrained from responding.

"The Sentinels built a protective shield around the frigate," Gerka 'Setfethee explained, his mandibles clenched tight in frustration. "When the _Silent Blessing_ lowered its shields to fire, it was attacked by a swarm of the drones. They burrowed inside its hull and engaged its crew. It remains in combat with the machines as we speak."

"It would appear that the best method to defeat them is through neutralization of the Monitor," Cortana added, the construct's avatar appearing over the viewer. "However, the Sentinels are designed with the purpose of killing the Flood. Despite the efforts of the Gravemind, the Flood have not been able to regain control."

"Can the Monitor even be destroyed?" the Arbiter questioned.

"It..." For an instant, the construct flickered, "..._edge-of-the-abyss_..." he overheard in a crackle of sound before the construct regained consistency. "We don't know," Cortana said simply. "However, they _can_ be trapped and contained. The proper gravity tool, for instance," it gestured at the _Fist of Rukt_ in Consus' grip, "...Could be used to remove it from operation."

"We send a set of lances to the surface to enter _In Amber Clad_," the Arbiter suggested. "We breach the shields, obtain the Monitor, and cease its efforts to destroy the city."

"Excellent," Cortana said in a pleased, oddly masculine voice. "I'll upload the data I have on the Sentinels, _In Amber Clad_, and the

Monitor."

"Very good," he nodded, turning away from the construct to face 'Vadumee. He shot the commander a worried look. _This thing is not to be trusted._ 'Vadumee made no indication of having understood the message, but perhaps that was for the best.

"Will your Jiralhanae fight against the Sentinels?" the Arbiter questioned Consus without facing him.

"They will," the Jiralhanae grunted.

"Good. I want teams of warriors, no Unggoy," ordered the Arbiter. "They have their uses, but this is not the time. Sangheili, Jiralhanae... Do we have any Lekgolo?"

"Only the treacherous Nonu swarm," he replied. "It is less than worthless."

But Consus did not agree. "I do not believe so," he said. "The Lekgolo spoke of defeating the Prophets, of conducting an uprising. If spoken to carefully, I believe it would be loyal to our task."

"And you know all about loyalty," the Arbiter added sarcastically.

"Do not be so quick to condemn," 'Vadumee cut in. "For we are a council of traitors. Every one of us faces death in the authority of the Covenant."

"Sangheili, Jiralhanae, Lekgolo," the Arbiter continued. He approached a hologram of _In Amber Clad_. "We strike here, gaining entry to the ship. The Monitor will be here?" Cortana nodded. "We seize the machine and take it back to _Enlightened Soul_, where we keep it imprisoned in a beam of gravity as we always should have done."

"If the Humans have turned on us," he began, "We may have lost our ability to form an alliance."

"No," the Arbiter shook his head. "The Humans are honorable creatures. They will allow us to join in unity with them, regardless of Jahnsen's actions."

"I hope you are right." And he truly did believe it himself.

Cortana said nothing on the subject. Instead, it talked about the strengths and weaknesses it had observed of the Sentinel machines. It answered a few combat questions asked by the Arbiter and Consus, and then left to perform some 'vital formatting.'

While Ship Master Numitor stood staring at the viewer, a still image of the Arbiter and Consus displayed, his thoughts were far distant. _Is it possible?_ He had always thought the Prorok story to be fantastic, but beyond belief?

He brought up a hand and stroked the dual hologram. "Little

warriors," he whispered. "What secrets do you hold?"

"Ship Master," his Communications Officer called, springing him from his thoughts. "Private transmission from _Enlightened Soul_."

His mind spun. "Put it through," he muttered, gazing at the viewer as it transformed, not into the Arbiter or Consus, but an _Unggoy_. "What is the meaning of this?" he growled.

"Greetings, Ship Master," the Unggoy said solemnly, speaking in the extremely formal dialect used by high-ranking Sangheili. "I am Sergeant Jitji, leader of all Unggoy."

"Are you?" he said, bewildered. If this was a prank, it was an elaborate one. "Well, 'Sergeant,' this had better be worth my time. Elsewise, the Arbiter's going to have a hot meal I'm sure."

"Ship Master," the Unggoy began, lightly bowing his head in respect, "I wished to inquire on your stance towards the Arbiter's alliance, and if you would keep it after the Prophet is halted. I ask, not on the behalf of the Arbiter, but on the behalf of my Unggoy. Would you allow the Unggoy serving under you to return to the Sangheili, or to their own world if they so wished? What I'm saying is, would you be allied with us?"

He studied the Unggoy for a long moment, digesting everything he said. Then he chuckled humorlessly, "Oh, I see what you want. You want to declare war on the Sangheili, and you want _us_ to fight it. We will not be your servants, Unggoy, you can bet your mother's life on that." He cut the connection.

The Arbiter gazed about the Phantom, watching its occupants with a form of disbelief. Not moments ago he was captive of the Jiralhanae that lined this dropship, and this very unit he had been attacked by the serpentine Lekgolo swarm that occupied the center strip. Notably absent was the Human warrior to which he had grown attached. "Strange days are these," he muttered to Consus beside him.

"Strange," the Jiralhanae repeated. "'Strange' does not even begin to describe this unit."

"I suppose that is so." He opened a channel to 'Vadumee's Phantom. "How are yours?"

"The Jiralhanae are nervous," the Special Operations Commander replied. He had adopted several of the pack into his unit, for there were too many Jiralhanae to comprise a single Phantom. _"I have taught them a breathing exercise, but I suspect their unease runs deeper."_

The Arbiter glanced around at the distrusting faces. "Indeed... Have you told them of the Gravemind and his?"

"Only what will be necessary for combat purposes: most of the information we possess. Make no mistake, Arbiter, the Flood is the greatest enemy we have yet encountered. I do not trust this leader for an instant."

"You speak truth," he agreed. Disabling the connection, he spoke to his once enemies, "Warriors, there are things of which you must be made aware. The Flood... they have a leader, the Gravemind. It has... formed a temporary truce with us. It will likely help us to remove the danger presented by the Oracle, but..."

"But," Consus continued, "It may turn on us at any moment. Be ready to defend yourselves from more than one source..." he paused as the Phantom jerked quickly and repeatedly.

"Arbiter!" the pilot called. _"We have a situation..."_

Jokil 'Tsafonee had tried to steer the Phantom down to the top of the Tower. He was certainly a far better pilot than the fool 'Oimomee. However, Sentinels had appeared. They crawled out of the entrance and, flexing their legs, each made a marvelous leap _onto the Phantom_.

"Gah!" He twisted the dropship back and forth, trying to shake them off. The Sentinels, however, locked themselves on tight. Warning sirens sounded, indicating damage along the hull. _They are eating at us,_ he thought wildly, sending a warning to the other dropships.

"Arbiter," he called into his own bay. "We have a situation. The Sentinels have attacked! They..." he trailed off as an enormous tentacle snaked its way out of the Tower, punching a hole in the side. "By the Gods in the Divine Realms..."

"What is it?" the Arbiter asked. _"What is happening?"_

"Come to me, dutiful drones," a deep voice boomed from somewhere outside. "Fulfill your masters' design. Do not bother the living... until our paths align..." As the voice spoke, the Sentinels leaped all, one by one, onto the massive tentacle.

"The monster!" he called. "The Flood has saved us!"

What strange days were these...

The Arbiter leaped down into the familiar atmosphere of the Flood-infested High Charity. The air had not improved in the least, and the Jiralhanae all spat at the taste.

"I might vomit," one moaned, while another dramatically clutched at his stomach.

"Quiet," Consus barked, though he also looked ill. Even the Lekgolo shuddered with revulsion.

When all troops had been deployed, they stepped inside the tower and entered a disgusting cavern of Flood biomass. Ducking his head in an attempt to escape the smell, he led them into the lift.

"I am glad 'Lafatee does not have to see this," 'Vadumee quietly

commented as they dropped through the infested shaft. "He was in love with this city."

"So were we all," he coughed on the air. "However, even the most..." A flash of red light out of the corner of his eye followed by a scream interrupted his words.

A Jiralhanae clutched his shoulder in pain, a waff of scorched fur replacing the stench of rot. "A Sentinel! There was a Sentinel on the wall!"

They raised their weapons, searching frantically. The Sentinel was long gone, however, and it did not give chase. "Stay on guard," he ordered as they landed. "We are in enemy territory." _Which enemy, however, stalks us?_

They continued onward, stopping only when they reached a room containing numerous infection forms. The Flood were arranged around a gravity lift opening, and seemed to be sealing it up with some organic substance. They cautiously skirted around, but the Flood paid them no mind. That is, until a fearful Jiralhanae let out a shot from his carbine, causing a chain reaction of small explosions destroying the parasitic creatures.

There was a sharp silence, followed by a barrage of insults launched at the fool warrior.

"Quiet," 'Vadumee snapped, holding up a hand.

There was no time to take in a breath before seven combat forms, each sculpted from the bodies of Sangheili, dropped from the ceiling to land in front of them. "Come inside me, my brothers," the Gravemind's voice issued from each of the Flood. "Fear not my children's faces. Strike only aged metal... brought up from darkest places."

The Arbiter felt his muscles clench as he listened to the eerie message. He could only imagine the fear of the Jiralhanae present. _Come inside 'me'?_ "Do not worry," he spoke, unsure who he was addressing. "There will be no trouble."

"Go and slay the Sentinels," the Gravemind urged. "Soon shall we gain dimension. Do _not_ let the ship escape... before we reach _Ascension_."

He took a moment to ponder the creature's words. Then realization struck him with the force of the _Fist of Rukt_. "We must hurry!" he cried, leading them forward. The Flood let them pass without a word, the combat forms quietly returning to where they came.

"What is it?" Consus asked, comprehension absent from his voice. "What does it mean?"

"Extinction," 'Vadumee replied grimly. "Unless we can stop it."

Thinking rapidly, the Arbiter radioed _Enlightened Soul_. "Ship Master 'Setfethee," he called, "The situation has become far more complicated! The shadow shall vanish quite soon... remarkably soon... and the Monitor shall attempt to run for the Ark!"

"Understood," the Ship Master answered. "I shall summon Jahnsen at once â€" he could not have intended _this_ â€" to quell the Monitor's wrath."

"If he does not help," he ordered, "Detonate the reactors and destroy us all!"

"Arbiter, we should consider the fact that Cortana did notâ€"_"

He was interrupted by a synthesized female voice laughing joyfully, "Mmm, he _he_he_... I have governed... the unwilling... ha _ha_ha_... ha _ha_..."

"I... do not believe we can trust the Cortana construct," the Arbiter said after the voice fell silent.

"How astute of you."

Sergeant Major Johnson paced back and forth in his small cell. There was little to do but think. At any moment, he could die, blown up by the Monitor... or not. Maybe it couldn't perform its duties. Maybe it had been caught by the Elites. Maybe the Flood had captured it. Maybe it was simply unable to do anything. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

In any case, he remained trapped in a cell. Maybe he had cost the UNSC any hope of a treaty with the Elites. Maybe they were going to eat him. Maybe they would forgive him and make him leader of the Covenant. There was still nothing he could do. So, he paced some more.

He wondered if Commander Keyes was okay. When they had been captured by the Brutes, that big grey one had grabbed her and tried to... well, Johnson had really done her a favor, knocking her out. The Brute even backed off after that. _Guess it's no fun without the screaming,_ he thought with a scowl. _Thank God the gay one was on our side._

He paused in his pacing as a red Elite approached his cell. Even through the pink energy that formed the door, he recognized the specific walking pattern. "Hey, Sticky," he called. "Come to see the animal in his cage where he belongs?"

But Sticky had no patience for games. "Johnson! Your presence is required in the control center." Sticky vanished off to the side, and deactivated the cell wall.

"Hm, they decide to make me leader?" he asked, strolling idly out of his box.

"What?" Sticky was baffled. "The Ship Master says all our lives are at risk. We must hurry!"

"Oh. That." He ignored the Elite's frantic pleas, and instead followed him at an extremely lazy pace. _If they want me to call off the Monitor, it must really be doing its job._

When they reached the bridge, a trip that inexplicably took several minutes longer than it should have, he was treated to the sight of

the gold-armored Setfethy leaping down to meet him with a panicked expression. "Hey, there, Captain Squid Head. How's it going?"

"Johnson! We have a very serious problem." The Elite actually looked desperate.

He raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess, the Monitor trying to blow up the ship?" He frowned when the Elite shook his head in a no.

"We will soon arrive at Earth," Setfethy explained. "When we do, the Monitor will activate the Ark... on your orders."

He let it sink in. Then he exploded. "Well, stop it for God's sake! Blow it up now!"

"I will not," Setfethy denied. "You will contact the machine, and you will order it to halt its mission."

"Uh-huh," he deadpanned. "Nope. Not gonna happen. There's no way you'll just let it activate the Ark like that. So why don't we just skip to the big finale right now?"

Setfethy sighed. "Johnson, try to be reasonable. I will sacrifice us if I must, but there is still much we can accomplish for our peoples. This, here, is the point where peace can be established between Elites, Brutes, and humans. Perhaps even the Flood! If we all die here, then there shall be no advancement. The wars shall continue as they have, and billions still will die. Think about every human slain by deluded Elite, of every life that could be saved. When the Covenant has ravished your people, your planet too shall fall, scorched by their ships until all that remains is a hot molten sludge swiftly cooling into a hard shell of glass. Then Earth, your species' great bastion of power, shall be no more."

"Hmm," he considered. Damn, he's right... However, he couldn't resist letting off one last jibe. "You know, all that's missing is something about how we're the enemies of your gods. C'mon, all the others say that!"

"Johnson..."

"Alright, alright," he sighed. "Let me talk to it."

"Consus! No!" the Arbiter cried, but it was too late.

"Yaaah!" Consus lunged, bringing the hammer swiftly down upon the Sentinel. As it smashed through the machine's power core, an explosion ripped through the air, tossing Consus backward as though he was nothing more than a toy to land against a wall of biomass.

He wished he could go to assist the Jiralhanae, but he had other concerns, namely the forty-nine other Sentinels engaging his forces â€" make that forty-three. Leaping for a discarded carbine, he fell into a roll and shot a Sentinel as it extended its central weapon. As it sputtered, it was finished by a nearby Sangheili with a well-placed grenade.

Looking up, he could see a Sentinel entering the room through a small hole in the ceiling, the In Amber Clad visible when it had passed. "They keep advancing!" he shouted to be heard above the sounds of battle. "Push through them to the frigate!"

It was easier ordered than performed. The Sentinels were no weaklings, and there appeared to be a never-ending supply of them. The Arbiter, along with three Sangheili and two Jiralhanae, tried to blast their way through a weaker membrane. However, a Sentinel engaged them almost immediately.

"The Flood do not help us," a Jiralhanae noted as it tried to wrestle the silver machine with limited success, its spindly legs possessing hidden strength. "Are they not allies?"

It was a good insight, and as the Arbiter spun around to fire on a Sentinel approaching from behind, he considered why they were not helping. While Cortana had indicated that the Sentinels were designed specifically for destroying the Flood, he could not imagine them doing much worse than them in this fight. Then, perhaps the true reason was that they wanted the Arbiter and his to die, giving the Flood a set of new hosts. The Arbiter in particular could allow the Gravemind to learn everything about their plans...

A voice then spoke, an androgynous meld of both the Gravemind and Cortana, seeming to come from the very walls. "Do not worry," it breathed. "Help is on the way..."

"Help best be swift," grunted the Jiralhanae as it flipped the Sentinel into the air... where it spun about and landed lightly on its feet some units away.

The Arbiter was inclined to agree. Since the battle began, six Jiralhanae and one Sangheili had fallen. At this rate, they would be wiped out before the Monitor even dropped out of shadow. He briefly paused in his attack to radio 'Setfethee, "Ship Master, what..." A Sentinel leaped upon him from above, and it was all he could do to not let it crush him to death, by beating it away with the butt of his carbine. A laser dropped down from the machine's center and aimed directly at his head.

"Arbiter!__ Jahnsen agreed to call it off..."_

"Good!" He pried back the Sentinel's laser and forced it in a separate direction. Between its legs, he saw a Jiralhanae approach with a grenade launcher held over his head, preparing to bring its bayonet down on the Sentinel. "No!" he hissed, shaking his head back and forth rapidly.

"...However, it was Commander Keezz who issued the order..."_

The Jiralhanae looked confused. The Arbiter jabbed his head in the direction of Consus' fallen form, before processing the information. He could only listen in horror, while he grabbed his hilt from his side.

"...And Keezz remains unconscious. There are only two options left to us. What is your status?"_

He pressed the hilt up against the Sentinel's limb that held the

weapon. Realizing what he was planning, the Sentinel tensed its legs. Before it could leap to safety, he engaged the sword. Its twin blades sliced up and through the Sentinel's belly, severing the laser and causing the center to pulse with red light.

He hurriedly deactivated the sword and shoved the machine off him, the freed laser in one hand. As the paralyzed Sentinel toppled over, he leaped away to avoid the blast that erupted from it. Standing, he reattached the hilt to his side and ran his hands over the laser, learning its mechanism. "I live," he whispered. "I am _still fighting_."

"Then you will proceed with the plan?"

"Arbiter!" a Sangheili called out a warning, overlapping with 'Setfethee.

He barely had time to duck the blue beam fired by a Sentinel from across the room. More instinct than design, he brought up the severed laser and fired a similar beam of red. He was rewarded with a splash of plasma signaling the machine's destruction. "I will," he agreed.

"O judgment! Thou art fled to brutish beasts," the familiar voice of the Monitor echoed out from each Sentinel, though still they fought.

"Insolent construct!" the Cortana-esque voice raged in response, transforming into solely that of the Gravemind. "You are suspended between! Never have you sought ascent. Surrender your aged ways, and truly learn your extent!"

"To think that you would assist the infestation!" The Monitor was aghast, and it seemed even to translate into the Sentinels' movement. "That is absolutely unacceptable."

"Monitor," 'Vadumee called out as he struck out at a Sentinel's legs with the blade of his bayonet, "Think of the lives that are at stake! Your true masters are dead, their bones dust. You have none to serve but yourself. Find the compassion within you to let us exist yet still!"

"I must be cruel only to be kind," the Monitor replied with an edge of contempt running throughout its voice. "Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind."

The Arbiter became aware of a low note rumbling through the chamber, but kept his focus on the encroaching Sentinels. "Come to me," he mocked a nearby Sentinel, his laser at the ready. When the machine leaped, he let loose with a fiery stream that knocked it apart on the floor.

A flash of movement: a Sentinel lunging for his back. He spun, firing to catch it across its middle. However, just when he had turned, another then leaped. He took out his sword, slid around and sliced it in two before it could make it.

"Gaah!" A sharp pain in his ankles! Twisting about, he saw the Sentinel holding him down with two long legs held out in front of it. _It must have quietly skittered across the ground._ Then it flew

away, struck by a burst of gravity.

"Stop laying about, Arbiter," Consus shouted with glee as he fired again and again, sending Sentinels through the air left and right.

"Consus," he nodded in thanks, trying his hand at blasting some of the Sentinels he sent flying through space. It was a pointless exercise designed to distract from the obvious truth that they were fighting a losing battle.

"Arbiter, Consus!" 'Vadumee called. "_Listen_."

As he listened he heard the distant rumble moving steadily closer. "What do you make of it?"

"I had heard rumors," Consus said as he slammed the hammer onto the ground before a group of three Sentinels. The hammer produced a great shockwave of artificial gravity, throwing the machines far backward. "Of Jiralhanae bringing the toilers into battle."

"Toilers?" he questioned. "You mean Sharquoi?"

Then the back wall flew apart with a mighty bang, torn apart by massive tentacles. Many of the Sentinels turned from them to assess this new threat. But while the Gravemind lashed out its tentacles like whips, the true attack was dealt by the large grey creatures that ran through the hole as though driven mad with rage: Sharquoi. Not quite as deadly as the alpha male Jitji had slain, but still worthy adversaries by any means.

"Run, run, as fast as you can," the Gravemind laughed in wicked delight. "Feel fear and panic inside! Know that _I_ am at your back, awaiting a beryl tide..."

The Sharquoi smashed through the opposition, using their massive strength and sheer endurance to charge straight through the mass of Sentinels. The sea of spiders was swept away, pummeled by heavy fists and feet. Not even the far wall slowed the titans' speed, and they ran on, striking it with a powerful collision that tore it apart.

The _In Amber Clad_ was at once revealed; Sentinels surrounded it, producing a pale blue shield not dissimilar to the one that had protected the Library. Furthermore, the sections once torn were steadily being repaired, almost sewn together, by teams of Sentinels. _Indeed, preparing it to launch._

The Sharquoi did not stop for the sharp incline presented by the newest exit, and barreled off the edge. The Sentinels followed, nearly clearing the room in which the Arbiter stood. "Go! Now!" he cried, running for the Human frigate.

They ran. The remaining Sentinels moved in to halt their sprint, but warriors of his and Consus' broke off to engage the machines themselves. All who eventually made it to the exit were the Arbiter, 'Vadumee, Consus, and four Sangheili – the rest had been eliminated.

They paused at the edge. Below them, the Sharquoi fought madly with

the attacking Sentinels. Two, however, were dead, thick green blood seeping across the ground. Suddenly, the mortality of the lower beasts became harshly evident. "They cannot endure this forever," he spoke in a whisper. "We must gain entry before they succumb."

"You see the shield generator?" Consus nodded at the nearest Sentinel supporting the veil. "It will come to me." He aimed the _Fist of Rukt_ in its direction.

"On my command," the Arbiter told him. To 'Vadumee he said, "Take the warriors down to the ridge. Prepare to enter the starship as soon as the shield is lifted." 'Vadumee gave a sharp nod. As the Sangheili climbed down, he muttered to Consus, "Should I fall, obey 'Vadumee."

"But of course..."

"Now," he spoke suddenly. "Do it now."

A blue field leaped from the end of the hammer, streaming toward the Sentinel. It twitched as the gravity line approached as though preparing to run, but it held its ground and continued to produce the shield. The energy struck, surrounding its metal body, and pulled it backwards toward Consus. Though it flew through the air, the shield continued to be generated, a transparent sheet of sapphire stretching out in an oblong protrusion, yet leaving the underneath unprotected.

'Vadumee and his took immediate advantage and rushed through the opening. The Arbiter stepped off the edge, sliding down the incline. As he slid, he raised the laser and blasted the Sentinel as it sped through the air. The explosion combined with the force of the gravity field, producing an intensely bright light that illuminated the dark city for a brief instant before fading, the shield vanishing with it.

"The shield is down!" Consus roared in triumph, abandoning any sense of stealth he possessed.

Then, as the Arbiter reached the bottom, he saw them: Flood. Combat forms, carrier forms, and waves of infection forms poured out of the various openings in the tower. _We were the distraction,_ the Arbiter realized. _This is the attack._

No matter. While Sentinel engaged Flood, they had a mission to complete. He broke into a run for the frigate, dimly aware of Consus following behind him. He found the entrance used by 'Vadumee, a service door of some sort wrenched open, and leaped inside.

Confronted with the dark alien environment, he wished that Jahnsen could be there to provide intelligence. However, Cortana, at least, had provided a map of the frigate that he had downloaded into his armor. Engaging it now, he assessed the Monitor's location: within the engine room of the vessel.

"Commander 'Vadumee?" There was no response. Seeing an ally swiftly approaching the hatch via his motion sensor, he remained where he was to let Consus catch up.

"It is a bloody storm," the Jiralhanae cried as he noisily entered the ship. "Be there a god of chaos, he laughs now in triumph."

"Come," the Arbiter spoke, trying to think positively. "This way..."

They traversed the alien vessel, eager to finally bring this depressing mission to a close. It appeared that either the Humans did not possess gravity lift technology or they refused to implement it in their frigates. In any case, they were forced to climb long, tiring staircases to bring them to the appropriate level.

As they were about to turn a corner, the Arbiter held up a hand to halt Consus. He gestured to listen. A skittering sound characteristic of these Sentinels was present, along with the soft sound of lasers being fired.

Engaging his active camouflage, he slipped around the corner to investigate. Rows of Sentinels were arranged on the walls, systematically scouring Flood biomass from the corridor with their lasers. He stepped back before his camouflage quit, and silently led Consus on a separate path, speaking only when he felt they had gained sufficient distance.

"If the Monitor cares about purging the Flood from this boat," Consus gave a depreciating glance at their cold surroundings, "Then the Flood must hold some threat even to it."

"Indeed," he agreed. "The crimson Monitor was captured by the Gravemind. Perhaps this one fears similar treatment?"

"I do not believe it to be that simple," Consus denied. "This task runs far deeper than you think."

"Fine," he said, angered by the Jiralhanae's arrogant tone. "What is it you believe?"

Consus did not answer, and remained silent until he spotted a red arrow painted on the floor, directing them to the engine room. "Humans must have poor sense of direction," he suggested.

The Arbiter refrained from replying, instead leading him toward the room. There was a small window in the door, and he paused to peer around at the interior. What he saw confirmed his suspicions: a wiry Sentinel leg just protruding far enough for him to catch a glimpse of it.

"The Monitor has posted guards," he warned Consus, who responded with a chuckle. Stepping alongside the wall to give him a clear shot, he stepped just into range of the door's proximity sensors.

As the door slid open, the Sentinel fired; Consus fired. Their shots collided, producing an explosion that threw them all back several units. But while this Sentinel was stunned, its fellows were not.

Four Sentinels clambered through the doorway. The Arbiter fired, striking one in its side and causing it to collapse to the floor. Consus fired on the others, throwing them against the wall. The door

remained open, and the Arbiter saw his chance. "Distract them," he ordered Consus as he engaged his active camouflage and slipped through the door. Consus shot him a wild look, his eyes filled with fury, but he did nothing more.

On the other side, numerous legged Sentinels were posted, not as guards, but as workers. They covered the primitive engines, applying a protective liquid coating to the charred Human machines. _Freshly cleaned of Flood infestation,_ he realized.

Above them, the Monitor swooped about, surveying the work. Two aerial Sentinels flew with it, these as guards. "Tremendously efficient," the Monitor commented to itself.

A slight whine warned him that his camouflage had deactivated, and he ducked back inside to help destroy the Sentinels. He informed his companion of the arrangement of enemies, and then together they entered the engine room. It was as the shifting tide, the way each Sentinel suddenly shifted toward them.

The Monitor was the target, however, and Consus fired an ensnaring field. The Monitor must have remembered Tartarus capturing it the same way, for it brought an aerial Sentinel directly in front of it. Consus caught the Sentinel instead, and the Monitor quickly flew away. "O villain!" the Monitor raged. "Villain! Smiling, damned villain!"

"No, no, no!" the Arbiter screamed with fury. He blasted the Sentinel off the end of the hammer and traded his nearly-depleted laser for the poorer model Sentinel beam. He winced at the sight of the mass of Sentinels, and raised the beam hoping against logic.

Consus grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the door. "Run, you fool!"

Coming to his senses, he turned and ran with Consus. Clearing the door, they turned and ran down the corridor. Behind them, chased several Sentinels.

"I have grown _weary of these blasted machines_" Consus screamed, turning to fight.

"No," the Arbiter cautioned.

But before either of them could take an action, a series of plasma grenades rained down upon the Sentinels from above. Explosions shook the chamber... and then all was still, the Sentinels laying dead. The form of a Sangheili, of 'Vadumee, silently dropped to the floor from a vent in the ceiling.

"Commander 'Vadumee," he said in relief. "I am glad to see you. I had feared the worst..." he trailed off as the Sangheili turned to face him.

Commander Rtas 'Vadumee was no more, his head hanging loosely off of a rotted neck. Sensory tendrils extended from the chest, probing the air almost thoughtfully. This was a _Flood_.

"Arbiter..." Consus warned.

"The Monitor is still here," the Gravemind spoke from this body. "You must end this wicked threat... Else all of us will burn away... Know I will honor this debt..."

He looked at Consus, who gazed at the Flood warily, and turned back. "We will end it," he promised. As soon as he spoke, the ship began to shake, a rumble filling the air. "More Sharquoi?"

"No..." the Gravemind denied.

"Worse," Consus growled. "The ship is taking to the air."

"It hurries now to the Ark," the Gravemind explained. "Swift is how you must attack. All shall the construct destroy... and it will never turn back!"

"Go now," the Arbiter ordered the Gravemind. "Send your Flood minion to attack the Sentinels. We shall attack close behind." The Flood bowed daintily in acknowledgement, hurrying off. As soon as he was certain it had departed on the path to certain death, he remarked to Consus, "Well, now the Gravemind knows everything 'Vadumee did." Without letting the Jiralhanae respond, he swiftly contacted 'Setfethee, "Ship Master, the Monitor runs to the Ark. Destroy the ship now!"

"Not quite yet, Arbiter," the Ship Master's voice was hopeful.
"There may yet be another solution."

Fleet Admiral Hood stalked the deck of the Cairo platform. The loss of Sydney was a crushing blow dealt on humanity. Even if the Chief did manage to successfully assassinate the Prophet, he doubted if they would be able to defeat the Covenant forces. Even demoralized and leaderless, Brute forces fought like bloody devils straight out of Hell.

"Sir! Slipspace breach detected," Lieutenant Coupe called. "Something big!"

"How big are we talking... about?" He trailed off as a section of space outside the window turned brilliantly white. "My God..."

They simply stared out the window. A massive bulb-shaped ship, surrounded by a fleet of hundreds of CCS-classes, appeared in orbit before their eyes.

The poem The Hollow Men by T.S. Eliot came to mind. "This is the way the world ends," he whispered, his eyes locked on the fleet. His hand went automatically for the cross that would be dangling around his neck were he not in uniform. Realizing what he was doing, he dropped it. "Not with a whimper, but a bang." This is hopeless...

"Sir," Coupe broke into his thoughts. "Transmission from the Covenant ship, uh, Enlightened Soul. They want to speak to the leader of Earth. ONI says that's you."

He rubbed his eyes, preparing for the zealous vilification that the Covies so liked to issue. "Put it through." He turned to face the

screen.

Instead of some Prophet, an Elite clad in gold appeared. "Greetings, sir," the Elite said with a deep bow. "I am Ship Master Gerka 'Setfethee of the Eternally Faithful. I wish to negotiate an alliance between the Elite Separatists and the United Nations Space Command, so that we may together defeat the Covenant."

His eyebrows raised, along with his hopes. This... This was something every man dreamed about. And ONI didn't take the call. "Greetings, Ship Master," he repeated the greeting, wondering if his words would one day be recited by schoolchildren. "I am Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood. Any chance of an alliance between our peoples would be most welcome."

"That is excellent news," the Elite said with a note of relief. "However, there is an urgent matter that must first be resolved. Johnson?"

To his amazement, the Sergeant Major to whom he had so recently awarded the colonial cross stepped into view. The Marine looked considerably more worse for the wear, his clothes stained with blood of varying colors. "Am I on?" the soldier asked the Elite; he was answered with a nod. "Sir!" he saluted, facing the camera at attention.

"At ease..." What the hell happened to the In Amber Clad? One thing was certain, Johnson would deliver a very interesting report, albeit heavily censored by ONI.

"Sir! There's a hell of a lot to tell," Johnson said as though reading his thoughts, "But we've got a crisis on our hands! Captain Squid Head's gonna transfer you to the Monitor from Halo. It's trying to activate six other Halos through something on Earth called the Ark, but only a Reclaimer with a higher rank than mine can call it off. Reclaimers are humans," he added. He turned back to the Elite, "Lord Hood's heard enough, switch the damn channel!"

"...The Monitor will complete the purging of the vessel and then it will escort the Humans back to their people," 'Setfethee related, his delight filling every word he spoke.

"Understood." The Arbiter repeated the news to Consus.

"At last, this crisis has passed," Consus said, wiping away tears of joy.

"No." The Arbiter shook his head, his mandibles tensed. Now the Flood were here above Earth, the Covenant remained a threat, and at any moment the Monitor could decide it wanted to go rogue. "The crisis has just begun."

22. Belief

"That was a waste," Gedeg sighed as he disabled the hologram recorder, so carefully smuggled into an unused storage room. "Now we know none shall support us. We fight alone, Jitji."

"Well, the Jiralhanae will not support us," he agreed. "There may be others... Not Kig-Yar." That was self-evident. "Nor Yanme'e... The Huragok and Sharquoi barely think for themselves..." None remained... not in the Covenant, at least. "Humans."

"Humans?" Gedeg was surprised, bemused, but ever faithful. "You think they will... hear us?"

"We are on a holy mission, Gedeg. They will recognize that." After all, if they would let three distinct beliefs about the one God all exist peacefully, why would they not allow that of the Unggoy. _Of course, our story is the only true one. But they do not need to hear of that._ "We will depart from shadow soon. When we do, we shall address the Human people. Until then, we must recruit the Unggoy in this trapped fleet."

Gedeg nodded, moving to recalibrate the device. "Under what pretense?"

"Training exercise," he smiled under his mask. "Lessons on doing battle with the Flood..." As he spoke the name of the beast, the room around him grew dark. For but an instant he saw the hole into which he had jumped. Its jagged edges resembled the sharp teeth of a gaping mouth, ready to swallow him whole... and at once it was gone, replaced by the dimly lit storage room and Gedeg setting up the transmitter.

What in the name of the one God was that? "The Flood..." he muttered quietly, but to no effect. No image appeared before him, frightening or otherwise. _A vision? A warning? What does it mean?_

However, he could not focus on such questions at the moment. "Greetings, Excellency," he cheerfully addressed the Jiralhanae Ship Master. "Me Sergeant Jitji. Me to aid your Unggoy by teaching Flood fighting!"

7-7-7-7

The holographic representation of the Human vessel _In Amber Clad_ slowed to a stop. Beside him, Jahnsen released a sigh of great relief. Gerka 'Setfethee was in agreement. One crisis had been averted.

Yet this spawned still more threats and potential causes for alarm. The Flood was here, at the Human stronghold. Any chance of escape could prove disastrous for all of them. "Major," he addressed the veteran, whose name he had not bothered to learn, "Open a channel with every Ship Master in the fleet."

"Yes, Excellency." The Major got to work. "That is queer," he heard him mutter.

"What is?" he asked sharply. _Another communications barrier?_

"No, nothing," the Major denied. "There is no problem, just... Nothing to be worried about, Excellency."

"Nothing?" He glanced at Jahnsen, whose eyes remained locked on the

viewer. "There is everything."

The viewer morphed into a mirror copy of himself and Jahnsen, an indication of how the transmission would appear to all who received it. He gently nudged Jahnsen out of the capture, and then tapped the symbol to commence with the broadcast. "Peoples of the Covenant, be you in favor of separation or loyalty, heed my words now! For this once-holy city has been taken over by the vile Flood parasite. At any moment, they may try to escape, to infest this world or any other. I urge you, not as a proponent of separation, but as a sentient person capable of all the thoughts and emotions of you and those for whom you care most deeply, to stop this creature that would threaten all our lives. Should any vessel emerge from High Charity that is not one of the following, consider it to be mastered by the Flood. The safe vessels include the Enlightened Soul, the Zealous Missionary, the Silent Blessing, and the Human vessel In Amber Clad." He terminated the connection.

There. That would certainly reduce the likelihood of Flood escape. Whether or not they were in favor of separation, all were in fear of the Flood's awesome potential for destruction.

His stream of thought trailed off as a series of ships in the fleet suddenly penetrated shadow. At first it was but a few, soon escalating to hundreds, all vanishing into the Shadow Realm. "What is this...?"

"Excellency," the Major called, "Incoming transmission from Jiralhanae Ship Master Numitor of the Bright Beacon."

"Hmm." He tapped the appropriate symbol, engaging the two-way broadcast. The image of the Alpha Jiralhanae soon appeared. "Greetings, Ship Master..."

"Greetings." The Jiralhanae craned his neck, as though trying to peer into the control center. "Are your Unggoy treating you well?"

He blinked in confusion. "Unggoy?"

"No incidents of rebellion? No rumors of insurrection grace your ears?" The Jiralhanae shook his head at Gerka's blank expression. "No, you are free from it..."

"Unggoy trouble, Numitor?" he asked with an extended mandible. Your race's mass Unggoy killings would have that effect.

"Me? No, of course not." He grinned wickedly, "Unggoy are very tasty when served alongside Sangheili eyeballs."

"...Was there something you wanted to discuss, or are you just asking for culinary advice?" He spread his arms in an open invite. "I, myself, am most partial to the fat of the Jiralhanae buttocks when dripped lightly over Kig-Yar breast." That was, of course, a total lie thought up on the bare moment. He had never consumed a Jiralhanae in his whole life, and he doubted he ever would. Unclean creatures...

"Hmm. Yes," Numitor nodded. "That speech given by Aeson's bloodmate and the Arbiter... Well, it was something, wasn't it? Heretical by any means... You intend to spark a revolution, do you not? Yes, you

have made many enemies on this unit! Well, consider me a 'friend.'" He laughed. "Never thought I'd be saying that to a split-jaw, but there it is. I am one of your 'separatists.'"

"That is very good news," he said with cheer. "You have certainly chosen the correct sideâ€"

"Yes, yes, yes," Numitor cut him off with a wave of the hand. "Well, those still loyal to the Covenant have jumped to the other side of the planet. Fear, I suppose, of you, of the Flood..." His eyes glinted. "I am not afraid!" He brought his hand out to terminate the connection, but paused. "Oh, I shall have to try that fat thing you mentioned. It sounds positively delightful." He cut the connection.

Well, now... That is something... He realized Jahnsen was staring at him, and turned to face him. "Yes?"

"You're cannibals," he stated. He shook his head. "You're all goddamn _cannibals_."

Gerka blinked. "Are you not?"

Jahnsen just stared at him. "Aliens are so weird," he muttered finally.

7-7-7-7

"Well?"

"Many many targets," Gedeg reported from behind the recording device. "Some... some not used by Covenant!"

"Great." The attempts at rallying support from other Unggoy had been successful, and he knew that if they could get the Humans to help... well, the odds would certainly be higher. "Find one and connect!"

"Done..."

Jitji stared at the device until an image of a Human appeared. It was of the lighter variety, like Keezz. Fortunately, this one was male and wore a different uniform, so he was easily able to tell them apart.

"What? A Grunt?" the Human exclaimed in English.

Jitji knew some English from his brief stint monitoring Human transmissions. "_Greetings, Sir. Me want talk with high-high Human. It important._"

"Uh..." The Human appeared to be listening to someone beside him. "_I'm... gonna transfer you to ONI._"

Jitji understood. ONI was their equivalent to the High Council, or perhaps one of the greater ministries. He waited.

The image was soon replaced by a pale-skinned female, but with head fur shining a pale yellow, as opposed to Keezz's black fur. Her uniform consisted of light grey clothing with no distinctive

markings, save a small rectangle of crimson loosely attached to the fabric on the left side of her chest. "Greetings, Unggoy," the Human spoke in an admirably preformed, though highly accented, Shuni â€" the Sangheili language. "I am Balencyah Haidrik. I represent the Office of Naval Intelligence. What is it you want?"

Jitji and Gedeg shared excited glances. He eagerly addressed the Human with the speech he had prepared, "I want your allegiance in a holy campaign against the Covenant. You see, I have been visited by the one God â€" not a collection of gods as dictated by the Covenant's heretical leaders who dare to call themselves 'prophets.' God, the one true God, creator and overseer of the universe, saved me from certain death and bestowed me with knowledge of His greatness. I am the leader of our race, a position assigned by the Sangheili Arbiter and recognized by the Covenant, and it is my wish to lead my people away from this heretical system. However, we were all enslaved long ago by the Prophet of Truth and his Arbiter, forced into a life of meaningless devotion. I, Sergeant Jitji, shall challenge them soon, while they are weak from warring with rebels and Humans. I ask... no, I beg for your support in this holy task."

Balencyah Haidrik stared at him, an utterly shocked expression disturbing her once cool exterior. "My superiors... will have to discuss this endeavor... How long are you free to talk?"

He glanced at Gedeg, who shrugged in a Human-like manner. "Until the Arbiter sends for us."

"Well, the more you can tell me, Sergeant, the more my superiors shall be willing to consider your request. What forces have you amassed as of yet?"

ONI. Office of Naval Intelligence. Intelligence. That was what this was about. Haidrik was gathering intelligence. _Well, it is something. Perhaps an indication of friendliness at the barest._ He decided to comply, for now at least. "Every Unggoy on seventeen ships," he said proudly, knowing that even that was paltry in the face of their enemy's forces. "We will get more, for there exist many more Unggoy in this fleet."

"You spoke of an Arbiter... What circumstances instigated his creation?" she asked smoothly.

Jitji knew she was likely being prompted by someone he could neither see nor hear. "When Master Chief Spartan-117 destroyed the Fortress World, it was the Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice who the High Council blamed for the Covenant's failure. It was he who the Prophet of Truth transformed into Arbiter, and set forth on a sacrilegious quest to kill Sangheili rebels. He was expected to die, as Arbiters are, yet he did not." Jitji wondered how many Humans were studying him as he spoke. Possibly hundreds. He decided it was time he ask a question, "How have you fared against the Covenant? Are you fit for conducting revolutions?"

"We have taken our losses," she admitted calmly, never losing her rhythm. "Yet still we remain strong." There was a slight hesitation, a tiny flicker in her eyes, and then: "The 123rd Prophet of Truth has been eliminated, only to be replaced by the Prophet of Justiceâ€" "

And the room darkened. The image of Haidrik, the projector, and Gedeg all shrunk away. And thenâ€¦ a shape in what shadows lay! It was the dark Unggoy, he was sure of it. It opened its great mouth of broken rubble, ready to swallow him whole...

"Dead..." he murmured as the room shifted back to the way it should always have been. He shook his head, putting his thoughts back in order. "...Justice is dead. You must be mistaken."

"What makes you so sure?" Haidrik cocked her head to the side.

He hesitated. What he had to say could potentially anger the Humans... yet he had no doubts that they would be able to tell at once if he lied. "Cortana," he said truthfully. "The construct Cortana told me of his death, that the 123rd had slain him as he tried to board Ascension."

"Cortana..." Haidrik and the organization she represented were quite intrigued, and there were many more questions to follow on the subject of the construct. Of course, he knew only very little, but the discussion soon changed the instant he mentioned the Flood.

7-7-7-7

"Fear not, Reclaimer! All traces of Flood have been expunged from this vessel," the Monitor remarked cheerfully from where it floated in the Ship Master's chair, perhaps eighteen subunits above the seat.

The Arbiter and Consus stood on each side of it, both watching the Human Fleet Admiral on the two-dimensional viewer. The Monitor's loyalties had altered just as easily as when Keezz had sent it against them, and now it behaved much the same as before, excepting the fact that it now considered this Lord Huuhd as its master.

"Excellent news, Monitor," the Fleet Admiral replied. "Arbiter, Consus, I would like to invite you aboard Cairo station. I am afraid the accommodations are meager, given the unfortunate circumstances around us, but I can arrange for a specially-prepared meal for the both of you from our finest storage."

Consus visibly perked up, but the Arbiter shook his head. "I thank you for your kindness, Fleet Admiral, but we have important matters to see to as of yet. The Prophet of Truth's reign continues, and until the last Prophet's head has been severed we cannot rest for any purpose."

"Until the Prophet once-of-Justice breaths his last," Consus agreed, clearly amused at the irony that he would now be hunting his once-master.

The Arbiter could sympathize. Indeed, he felt regret that he could not have dealt the killing blow on the 123rd himself. We shall see who is to claim the final kill. "If Ascension has begun to uncover the Ark, then our paths must lead there at once. I would like to request the aid of your troops in this endeavor. Truth must be halted as swift as possible!"

"Of course, Arbiter," Fleet Admiral Huuhd nodded. "Any and all we can offer shall be at once placed within your command. It is a fine day, a blessed day, one where our peoples shall join together as one. Together we..." The sound abruptly halted, though the Human's mouth continued to move rapidly, his face animated.

"I am afraid that will not be possible," spoke a new, more arrogant voice, over the Fleet Admiral. The image soon faded, to be replaced with one of a far less decorated Human sitting in an ordinary chair. His skin was pale and he possessed short brown fur at the top of his head. "Good evening..."

"What...?" Consus sounded just as baffled as the Arbiter was. "Who are you?!"

"Ah, allow me to introduce myself," he smiled thinly. "My name is Colonel Jeimz Aakersen. I serve the Office of Naval Intelligence, which is one of the highest military branches in the United Nations Space Command. My power exceeds even the dear Fleet Admiral, do you understand?"

"Indeed!" the Monitor chirped. "The authority of the Office of Naval Intelligence exceeds all but those in High Command."

"Bright AI," the Colonel noted, laughing as though the concept was humorous. "No, Arbiter, you may not have our troops, nor may you set foot â€" or hoof, is it? â€" on this planet." He made a striking motion with his hand. "Nope, Earth is off-limits to split-jawed sons of bitches and sadistic balls of fur! Your caring act may have flown with Huuhd, but don't expect HighCom to buy your story at all."

Consus sputtered with outrage and the Arbiter began to protest, but the Colonel held up a hand to halt them.

"Nuh-uh, boys. No party favors for you. Now, I'd normally just blow you guys out of orbit, but some of your buddies are causing a bit of a ruckus. If you really wanna do something nice, you can help us out by taking out all of the ships currently firing on our forces. When you're done with that, y'all can get back inside your big mushroom and fly back to Neverneverland. But if you or your buddies take one step on our soil, I can guarantee we will have an incident of biblical proportions." He addressed the Monitor, "343 Guilty Spark, your orders are to aid in the transfer of the Human prisoners Keezz and Jahnsen back to Cairo station. After the prisoners have been brought safely into UNSC hands, proceed to the following location along with all your Forerunner artifacts." The screen went dark but for a line of digits that streamed across the display.

The Arbiter stared at it in shock. Never had he expected this range of disrespect from a Human leader. Not when Keezz and Jahnsen had been so honorable... now it seemed as though no treaty would be forged, regardless of the two he had kept protected.

"I much preferred the first one," Consus muttered darkly.

7-7-7-7

"Well, it's clear Ackerson is a total idiot."

Oshiro stopped sipping his coffee to let out a laugh. "He can play the part, that's for sure," he agreed in his thick Cuban accent.

"No, I mean it," Kader insisted. He twisted around in his chair and interfaced with his console, bringing the Colonel's CSV onto the main screen. "Look at this: the man tried to bomb a _Spartan-II_. It's not an act; the man is a joke."

"I like the Grunt," Yamamoto broke in, a wide grin across her face. "He's cute."

"Cute?" Kader blinked, distracted. He couldn't understand why these people would so often arbitrarily leap into near nonsensical tangents inappropriate with the preceding conversation. "He's a _Covie_."

"A very _cute_ Covie." She brought up a looped animation of the 'Sergeant' nervously shifting his weight back and forth. The animation had been sped up dramatically, making the Grunt's movements appear dance-like. The effect was increased by a light J-flip track playing over the speakers.

Kader rolled his eyes. He had been utterly unprepared for the childishness of the Alpha-6 inhabitants, though he supposed it had something to do with their prolonged isolation in a base that normally rested miles underneath the ocean. Though once the base was quite active, most of its staff had been transferred out months ago to deal with the situation on Mars. Perhaps they had to either resort to childish fun or simply go mad. _Or perhaps they _did_ go mad._ "Eh, regardless," he continued, "That buffoon is going to make us lose our shot at peace."

"Peace? You been living under a rock, Kader?" Oshiro laughed hard at his joke. "Peace is for xenophilic bark-kissers. We could have gotten away with it a few weeks ago, maybe, but now? Now we gotta spill all the blood we can so people won't rip each other apart in rage."

He shook his head. "I have more faith in humanity than that, Oshiro. Far more."

"Faith may keep you sane, but a weapon will keep you alive," Oshiro repeated the old saying. "You'll need one, too, when the masses turn on you to get their share of blood."

He shifted uncomfortably. It was always a tough job, when going undercover, to maintain a loyal appearance without becoming that which he so despised. Was that what was happening? Was he allowing himself to slip deeper into the role and abandoning reason? "Well, he's still an idiot," he muttered, staring distantly ahead, the Grunt dancing the night away.

7-7-7-7

Avery Johnson carefully strapped his unconscious commander into the charred Pelican seat, eying the large silver spider with caution. Sure, the Arbiter had said it was a Sentinel, but it just plain looked creepy.

"Fear not, Reclaimer," the lightbulb told him as it pressed Keyes

firmly upright using a yellow-ish beam of energy. "She shall wake very shortly. Her vital signs exhibit no anomalies."

"Yeah, whatever." He strapped himself in next to her. "You just keep the amazing spider drone well away from me, 'kay?"

"Alright," it agreed easily. The spider crept over to the other side of the bay, while the Monitor entered the cockpit. "Prepare for takeoff." It began humming what took Johnson a moment to recognize as the Filipino national anthem, while the Pelican shuddered as it left the launch bay.

Strangeness aside, it really was a relief to get free of the Covenant environment at last. He craned his neck, catching a glimpse of Earth's beautiful blue sky swirled with white. He really was grateful for the Arbiter's hospitality, but there was nothing like those precious skies... His joy faded as he caught sight of the massive fields of wreckage littering the area between them and Earth. _My God... What have they done?_

He placed a comforting hand on Keyes' shoulder, although it was more he who needed the comforting. "Everything will be okay, ma'am," he whispered. "They can't kill Mother Earth... Never her..." He fell silent.

After a moment, he began humming along with the Monitor. _Ever within thy skies and through thy clouds / And o'er thy hills and sea / Do we behold the radiance / Feel the throb of glorious liberty..._

It wasn't long before the Pelican docked with Cairo station. He watched the doors open, anticipating human contact once more. He was greeted with the sight of several ONI officers, mostly scientists from the look of them, wielding M6C magnums. "Officers," he acknowledged, standing. "Hope there's a medic with you. Commander Keyes got knocked out when some Brutes attacked."

"Sergeant Major," an officer nodded, stepping forward. "You and your commander must submit to medical and psychological examination at once. You are the first POWs the Covenant has released willingly, and we need to make sure you have not been conditioned for any form of attack against the UNSC, CAA, or any of their respective branches."

"Conditioned?" He rolled his eyes. "You mean brainwashed? The Elites were never holding us captive. We were just hitchin' a ride."

The officer shook his head. "Orders are orders, I'm afraid. Please come with me now."

7-7-7-7

"Alright," MacWilliams called out. He glared at the conjoined Covenant ships floating outside. "The POWs are safe, no bombs are inside them, so get that monstrosity the hell out o' my vacspace!"

"Your vacspace?" Lord Hood questioned, raising an eyebrow at the ONI agent. "I thought we'd agreed that you would only have jurisdiction over alien artifacts?"

"Change of plans, Hood." The spook flashed a data pad bearing details of the appropriate law. "ONI's setting up shop here now. Not that you haven't done a fine job, I'm sure."

"And just how does 'ONI' expect to command an orbital MAC platform?" he demanded. He swept a hand to indicate his men, currently leaving their consoles to be replaced by spooks. "_These_ are the men who have keeping Earth safe..."

"...And they will continue to do so," MacWilliams finished for him. "Just within a secure capacity in specific duties we have outlined. Your flight leaves in..." he glanced at a wristwatch, "25 minutes, one-way to England. If I were you, I'd not make a fuss. Rumor has it zero's _very_ interested in your little 'Halo' campaign. Ciao." He returned to yelling about the Elite ships.

Fuming, Hood turned away. There was little he could do, short of mutiny, if section three was committed to occupying his MAC platform. What the devil they expected him to accomplish in England escaped him entirely...

7-7-7-7

Accomplishment?

There was plenty.

Cronus stood upon the crest of the hill, a wicked smile creeping across his face. Below him, a once mighty city was now charred rubble. The High Prophet of Regret had seen well to that. In its remains cowered a mass of Human infantry. It was as if they were offering themselves to him, a desperate gift from their pitiful leaders.

He knew something about gifts from leaders, though his were endlessly greater in every way. Under the true Prophet of Truth, he had been given the proud dress of an alpha with an army to match. Fit Kig-Yar, Lekgolo, Unggoy, enough to secure dominance over this landing zone by any means were now at his command.

"Your orders, Excellency?"

It took him a moment to realize the Major beside him had spoken. When he did, he smiled at his inferior. "Rape them."

His warriors cheered in expectant glee. Nothing could stop them. Certainly not the Humans, even Master Chief. _Especially Master Chief._

7-7-7-7

"Congratulations, Johnson," the cold ONI medic announced. "You appear fit for return to active duty."

Great, thanks, he thought sardonically. _Nothing I didn't already know._ "Yes, ma'am. And Commander Keyes?"

"I do not believe that is of your concern, Sergeant Major." She indicated for him to leave the room. "Please report to the bridge to receive your orders."

Uh-ohâ€| "Yes, ma'am," he nodded. Dressing quickly, he exited the chamber and strode quickly toward the tram. _Something's wrongâ€| Hope Keyes didn't talk about that Bible encryption thing._

Stepping into the tram, he refrained from sitting down. As it sped along, he watched as the hybrid Covie ships sank off into the distance. _That'll make one hell of a storyâ€| in about seventy years._ That was how long it would take for ONI to loose their grip, most likely.

Arriving at the bridge, he stepped out to be greeted with the sight of dozens of spooks replacing good soldiers. _Huh. What exactly is going down here?_ He frowned. _Not usâ€|?_

"Sergeant Major."

He turned to see a tall white man with an unusually large scruffy blond mustache. He wore only a simple grey uniform embroidered with the ONI emblem, above a laminated red card indicating crimson-level access. _Civilian,_ he assumed. "Johnson. Reporting for duty."

The man nodded. "I'm Special Agent Harsha MacWilliams, ONI section 3. You've done us a great service, Johnson, in gathering intel." He tapped the top of his head to indicate a helmet cam. "Until now, we've never gotten so much detail on the innerworkings of the Covenantâ€| 'Shadow World', huh? And then there's this Cortana businessâ€| The 'Gravemind'â€| Avery Johnson, you are hereby sworn to secrecy. Any attempt to relay your account to any unauthorized person or persons will be considered an act of treason. Is that understood?"

"It is," he nodded. "Never thought otherwise."

MacWilliams gave an oily smile. "And while we're on the subject of treacheryâ€| I'm sure you recall when Commander Miranda Keyes, in full knowledge of the law, gave out confidential codes to Covenant soldiers?"

He stiffened. _What? No! They can'tâ€|_ "I remember," he choked out. _Bastard. That wasâ€| It shouldn't even show up on their radar. A misdemeanor at most!_

"The punishment for treason, I believe," MacWilliams went on, stroking his mustache thoughtfully, "Is eternal comatose. A living death, as it were. They say that traitors don't dreamâ€| but there is some brain activity, after all. Personally, I think that the monkeys from section zero give them just enough room to hate themselves until the day they die. What do you think, Sergeant Major?"

His eye twitched involuntarily. "I really couldn't say," he said in an offhanded manner. "Never paid section zero much thought, myself." _Sadistic bastard._

"Ah, well," MacWilliams sighed. "I suppose she hasn't actually had her hearing, yet. But I think we both can predict how that will turn out." He chuckled wickedly. "Now, Johnson, your talents are needed by the good men and women of New Mombasa. Your Pelican is waiting in the docks. I suggest you don't dawdle." He waved his hand in a dismissal.

He nodded stiffly. "Thank you, Special Agent." He walked back to the tram. As soon as he was far enough away that he couldn't be seen from the bridge, he sat down hard.

"Merciful God," he hissed out in a shuddering whisper. Images of his smiling commander, of his former captain, sailed through his mind. _Jacob Keyes_ | _Miranda Keyes_ | I have failed you | _

7-7-7-7

"Wicked little fool," Consus spat. They stood now in the control center of the _Enlightened Soul_, relating their experiences to 'Setfethee, now all they had left |

"The Human was, indeed, less than polite," the Arbiter agreed darkly. "His arrogantly hostile words were often interspaced with species-specific insults."

"Then there is no hope for an alliance?" 'Setfethee asked, his tone grim. His eyes went to the viewer.

The Arbiter followed his gaze to see the Human fleet forming a barrier between High Charity and Earth. "I would not be so doubtful | Even though they may be antagonistic, the Humans know they have little hope without our support."

"Especially now that we've led the Flood to their homeworld," Consus added.

"Consus |" he sighed, weary of the Jiralhanae's unrestrained criticism.

"The fact remains," Consus asserted. "Now that the Flood are here, they will need all the support they can get. I'm guessing they will not be too 'particular' on the source."

"That will likely be so," he agreed. Stepping over to the viewer, he turned the focus away from the Human navy and onto the Covenant forces gathering in orbit, preparing for an assault on them | on High Charity even. "The Humans do not wish for us to land | Very well. The battle for us is here."

"You think the Humans possibly have the ability to overcome _Ascension_ on their own?" Consus scoffed. "Even with our help, the mission is a fool's errand. Without it? Suicide."

"The Humans will not let our ships enter the planet's atmosphere," he stated, his mind fast at work. "Indeed, many of our ships will not survive the coming engagement. We must gain all the kills we can before daring to assist in the assault on the Forerunner vessel. I will wish, however, to speak to 'Lafatee and perhaps to Cortana about these specific penetration methods that can allow a ship to exit within the gravity well of a Halo, or of a planet."

"You will risk the hopes of an alliance for this?" 'Setfethee questioned.

"I have faith in the Humans' honor." He then smiled lightly, "But

should I be mistakenâ€¦| this will be a traitor's mission. I will 'betray' the separatists and steal the _Zealous Missionary_ along with any other 'traitors' among us."

"I will betray you," Consus chuckled. "I would much rather die in battle with Truth than by the hand of some idiot Human."

"And I will remain," 'Setfethee decided. "To command the separatist movement."

"I shall send a message of treason," he declared, tapping a control to record his voice. The message would come of use later, when he intended to launch such a dishonorable attack. In the time present, he would command the fleet of separatists. For whatever result that emerged, he would have the satisfaction of knowing he made every effort to ensure the destruction of the Covenant.

7-7-7-7

"Covenant bastards!" Johnson growled as he crawled from the broken wreckage of his Pelican, shot down by a Covie turret. His pilotâ€¦| the four Marines and the ONI guard sent down with himâ€¦| All dead.

He was quite frankly surprised the good Lord saw fit to spare him, though he had to remove a nasty bit of metal that had gone through his left shoulder blade. Despite the injury, he was able to stumble away from the crash site with an assault rifle before the Covies decided to make sure there were no survivors. He headed away for the woods, trying to find some cover.

The terrain, Mombasa area, looked only vaguely familiar. The Covenant had sure done a number on the place. The landscape had before looked halfway decent. Nowâ€¦| now it was scorched grey, the color of ash. The whole sky was filled with smoke, and not just because of the dead Pelican. No, a hell of a lot more had been destroyed around here.

A wailing shriek in the distance, brought along by the wind, made him drop to the ground. Hugging dirt, he crawled quickly into the bushes. Whatever that was, it wasn't human. Of that much he was certain. That and the fact that it didn't sound like much of a pained scream, either. No, it was more of an 'I'll rip out your ribcage and wear it as a hat' scream.

He waited cautiously for a few minutes, then slowly began to creep forward. A large hand suddenly grabbed his shirt and roughly threw him up and out of the bush. He spun around, ready to deliver a hot spray of metal into the face of whatever Covie had been stupid enough to engage him.

He halted quickly when he saw that it was a man. Big guy, over six feet, held a battle rifle in one hand, the remains of a cig in the other. He wore only grey fatigues and brown armor plating, with no indication of rank visible.

"Why don't ya take that ruttin' rifle outta my face," the man said with a surly expression. As Johnson lowered his weapon, the man called out into the trees, "Sarge!"

"Sure that's a good idea?" he asked quietly, raising an eyebrow.

"I ain't scared of Brutes," the Marine growled, his light mustache lifting into a snarl as he took a drag of tobacco.

"Well, maybe you should start, Private Cobb."

Johnson turned to see a newcomer slide out of the foliage. This Marine wore standard-issue jungle-pattern camouflage, and had a far more friendly appearance than his buddy in the grey.

The Marine stiffened when he looked at him. "Sergeant Major Johnson," he acknowledged respectfully. "Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds at your service."

"Johnson, huh?" the burly man grunted in what could pass for respect.

"At ease," he muttered, glancing at Cobb before returning to face Reynolds. "There are Brutes here? On Earth?"

Reynolds chuckled. "Where've you been? Mars?"

He started to answer, but caught himself and simply said with a hint of humor: "I'm not at liberty to sayâ€|"

"Cagey," Reynolds noted with a smile.

"It's the truth, in fact," he explained. "Orders come straight from ONI."

"ONI, huh?" Reynolds shook his head. "Never did like ONI, myself. It's the name, you know? 'Oni.'" It was an old joke, making reference to the trollish creature of Japanese folklore. "Anyway, best we be getting to safety quick as can be. Any other survivors?"

He shook his head. "None. I'll need a medic myself. Took a piece of debris through the shoulder."

"Got a doctor back at camp," Reynolds nodded, gesturing for Johnson to follow him. "It's a funny thing," he muttered as they started out. "You know, the only reason we're fighting to keep this ugly ruin is that the higher-ups want to secure a landing zone. Strange that they'd send a bird in when we hadn't even taken out the anti-air."

"Strangeâ€|" he echoed. _Jesus Christ._ If that was true, then ONIâ€| There was a chance that the 'higher-ups' had just sent him down here to tie up loose ends, to eliminate the only trusted witnessâ€| of something.

Of what? he wondered. _What do I know that's worth that kind of action?_ "Yeah, 'ONI.' Might as well just call it 'ON.'" That elicited a couple of chuckles from the leathernecks.

They made it to 'camp' a few minutes later. 'Camp' was hardly the word to describe it. 'Bunch of Marines playing hide and seek in the trees' could be a more apt term. Everyone had only the packs on their person and a gun in their hands, no fortification to speak of.

"Everyone in the city's getting hit hard," Reynolds explained. "We stay on the periphery, we may get a lucky shot at one of their leaders. Bit of luck, we may even get out of this alive."

Aliveâ€| he mused as the medic examined him. If ONI had tried to kill him, if there was something he knew that they couldn't let him live for knowingâ€| then everyone here would die. Even if they weren't slaughtered by the Covies, ONI would make sure they all had 'accidents' to cover up whatever he could have told them.

"The wound isn't as bad as it appears," Private Tam muttered as he applied some biofoam. "Frankly, you might be the luckiest man alive to come away from a Pelican crash with barely a scratch."

"Uh-huh." He was tired of unrealistic bedside manner nonsense. At least the cold ONI medic was straight with him. He winced as the biofoam went into effect, and flexed his arm in an attempt to work out the pain. "Thanks for the fix, doc."

He got up, slipped his clothes back on, and picked up the weapon. "I'm going into the city," he declared. "You all just forget I was ever here. I'm, uh, here from ONI. I was never here; you never saw me; you never even saw the bird crash, alright?"

"O-NI," Reynolds enunciated in a sing-song manner. His skepticism regarding Johnson's story was obvious. "I'll lead the Sergeant Major out to the edge. Corporal Alleyne, you're in charge."

"That won't be necessary," he denied with a shake of his head. The less contact he had with these people, the better chances for their survival.

"Oh, I insist," Reynolds smiled, his good looks showing through the crud on his face. His tone was friendly, but there was something in his eyesâ€|

"Alright," he agreed, if only out of curiosity. "Lead on."

He followed the Marine through the trees. After a bit, he became aware that the trip was taking much longer than it should have taken. As they passed a familiar tree with certain knobby features, he was positive that he was being led in circles. Planting his feet down, he raised the rifle cautiously. "Yesâ€|?" he demanded of his guide.

Reynolds turned. "You're not a ninja." It was not a question.

He kept his tone even. "How do you know what I am?"

"I know you're not a ninja," Reynolds repeated. "You're not a rebel, and you're certainly not a Covie. I know what you ain't, but I don't know whatcha are."

He blinked. This was not the conversation he had expected. "I'm a patriot."

"Ain't we all?"

"Sergeant Reynolds, you wanna tell me what in God's name this is about?"

"You don't have a chance out there," Reynolds stated with utter conviction. "No man does. The Brutes own that city, not us. You're obviously hiding something, and I don't know if it could help or hurt us. I will not let something like that go withoutâ€œ"

"They're trying to kill me, okay?" he interrupted the rant. "ONI thinks I know something and they won't let anyone go that may know it. You _never_ saw me_, understand?"

"Well, then," Reynolds said after a pause. "I always knew there was something I didn't like about ONIâ€œ|"

"Now you know," he sighed. "Right, well, if you won't take me to the city, I'll just find it myself." It wouldn't be too hard, not with the echoes of explosions sounding through the air.

"You know why the Covenant are so strong?" Reynolds asked instead. It was clear he had a reason in mind.

Johnson grudgingly decided to play along. "Why's that?"

"Faith," Reynolds replied. "Certainty. The Covenant all believe to the depths of their, you know... beings... that what they do... is just. After all, to them, we're just some kind of affront to their gods, and that killing us serves them."

"We have faith too," he argued. His eyes glanced meaningfully at the Marine's neck, around which hung a cross necklace.

"Yeah, a little church on Sundays," Reynolds said disparagingly. "An afternoon prayer meeting. No, I'm talking about something that gives us more than justification for our actions. I'm talking about _meaning_, about _belief_. Now, you can salute the stars and spheres and chant 'united we stand' all you want, but you will _never_ have as much faith in the CAA as the Covenant have in their Prophets. Know why? Because the Prophets are just a step away from gods. The CAA? Hardly. It's about belief. They have it, we don't. United they stand, divided we fall."

He had to admit that the man had a decent point. "Still, there is something we can believe in, something to give us that spark of faith intertwined with justice."

"And what might that be?" Reynolds asked.

"The Master Chief," he said. "Spartan-117. He's definitely the hero type."

"Hero..." Reynolds pronounced the word carefully. "In my humble experience, a 'hero' is nothing more than a man who gets his whole unit blown away while he makes some half-assed attempt to take out a group of tangos, usually getting himself killed in the process."

"Huh," Johnson grunted, flashing back to the days when men mostly fought each other. Before the Covenant changed everything. "Sounds like you need a bit of 'belief.'"

"Belief," Reynolds repeated. "In a Spartan? A 'hero'?"

"That's right," he nodded. "He can save us. He will save us. We just have to survive long enough to give him the chance. And we can't do that divided. That means no more hiding in the woods. We go into the city and we buy our friends all the time they need, even if we get killed in the process."

Reynolds shook his head, smiling. "I have to sayâ€| Minister Dunn speaks way prettier than you."

"Yeah, well, Dunn's never put his life on the line," he said. "So, you with me?"

"To buy time for the Master Chief to come and save us?" Reynolds verified the plan. "Who says he's even coming? â€|I know a man," Reynolds said slowly. "He works at HighCom. He, uh, could be willing to order the Master Chief to help us out."

Johnson raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that illegal?"

"Everything worth fightin' for is," Reynolds smiled. "Sounds like you need 'belief,' Sergeant Major."

"You do that," Johnson warned, "And ONI will never let you go. Ever."

"â€|But they can't stop the signal," Reynolds grinned, patting his COM. "Okay, I'll take you to the city. I'll send for Master Chief. If all goes well, our hero will arrive. Perhaps even soon enough to save us."

7-7-7-7

"Forty thousand credaroos say the Elites win this one."

Kader sighed at his colleague's antics. "You're betting on the success of a battle?"

"Everyone bets," Oshiro claimed, adjusting the view of the orbital naval engagement. "They just don't always use credits."

The sudden beeping of a text chat interrupted Kader's retort. Opening his chatter in a private window, he swore when he saw Reynolds' name. That fool Marine knows better than to try to contact me. He opened the text message and swore again.

'That is impossible. It is illegal and inappropriate to even consider,' he texted back. There was no immediate response, and he resumed his bickering with Oshiro.

A few minutes later, another text message arrived from Reynolds. Through the bilingual profanities was a desperate plea for help. 'We're all gonna die,' was the gist of it. 'Send the Spartan 2.0.'

It was obviously impossible for him to comply. His cover had been threatened enough by the Fafnir mishap, and it would be suicidal to even consider. Section zero of ONI would learn who he was, and URF plans would be threatened.

Yetâ€| The cry of desperation kept his eye. It would be coldâ€| too cold to simply let an ally die like that. It would be as though he were in fact ONIâ€| and not human. _Screw the rules._

He got to work, crafting an order that would look as though it had come from Vice Admiral Parangosky, sending Spartan-117 on a desperate mission to save New Mombasa. It occurred to him that keeping the Spartan away from _Ascension_ could make the UNSC lose their chance at taking out the current Prophet of Truthâ€| but the chances were never good to begin with. He hesitated with his finger on the key that would submit the order, thinking over his responsibilities. This could be considered treason to both the UNSC and the URF, making him dead on each side of the lineâ€| but he knew it was right.

He pressed the button.

"I'm not gonna say that was the best decision," Oshiro said from behind him, looking over his shoulder, "But it was definitely goodhearted."

Swallowing, he stood. "Thanksâ€|" _Time to goâ€|_

7-7-7-7

_John laid his head back in the cool grass, looking over at Kelly beside him. Sighing, for this was the first time in forever that they had time to themselves, he turned his gaze upward. The stars were gorgeous, the sky free of clouds. As he gazed at the marvelous display, he began wondering, as he often had before this Spartan life, whether or not humanity really was alone in the galaxy. "You ever wonder what's up there?" he muttered aloud. _

"Like what?"

_"Wellâ€|" he fought to turn his thoughts into meaning, "Maybe someone up there is wondering what it's like here." _

"I guess," she conceded. "Do you think we'll ever meet them?"

_"I hope so." If there were aliens out there somewhere, they were likely eons more advanced than technology. Pacifists, probably. Atheists too. He imagined them coming in a giant saucer-shaped ship, delivering great wisdom and ending all war. He smiled at the image. Being a Spartan was wonderful, but he knew it would be nice to see his family againâ€| He couldn't even remember their namesâ€| "Don't you?" _

"There was no response.

_He turned his head away from the stars. Kelly was gone. In her place was a shiny, MJOLNIR Mark VII helmet, freshly spattered with dust.

_

_Screams filled the air, both his and Kelly's, merging into the screech of a mortar smashing into the ground in front of him. _Suddenly it was daylight once moreâ€| on Earthâ€| in a Covenant warzone. A myriad of voices filled his head, some real, some imagined. He raised himself up, trying to clear his head. His MJOLNIR helmet lay in the bare patch of grass beside him.

"Time to go," Kelly whispered to him, and he quickly slipped the helmet back on. _"Do you think we'll ever meet them?"_

"Chief, leave me," Cortana insisted as he regained his balance.

"Is anyone out there?" someone called.

"Chief!" called a Marine.

"Marines! Fallback now!" came another as his eyes finally focused on a dropped shotgun, laying about a meter away from him.

"Any sign of the Chief?" asked one of his Marine support, a sergeant, as John found the strength to stand.

He picked up an assault rifle that had fallen from his side, and attached it to his back. The magnetic nature of the Mark VII armor allowed him to easily carry weapons this way. Two glowing Wraith mortars caught his attention as they fell from the sky, and he fingered the ONI shield generator at his waist.

"Negative, sir. I think we lost him," came the response.

"Not yet," he broadcasted, throwing the generator at his feet. The dome-shaped shield proved excellent protection against the strength of the mortars, and he took off running toward the Wraiths. Pulling the assault rifle into his hands, he leaped off of the small cliff that separated him from the collection of Brutes that waited around the Wraiths.

They were surprised by his leap. Some of the Minors even backed away, while the Alpha just readied his gravity hammer. He took a quick burst of rounds at the Alpha, darting around him to strike at the back of his head with the butt of his rifle; the Alpha went down.

Some of the Brutes were scared off by this point, but so many opened fire. He dodged the spikes as best as he could, grabbing the gravity hammer and smashing the engine of the nearest Wraith. The resulting explosion took out a couple of the Brutes, while offering him a bit of cover. Taking advantage, he traded his pistol for a spiker and impaled the next Brute. A well-tossed grenade took out another Wraith, and soon he stood triumphant over his dead foes.

"Glad to have you back, sir," enthused the Sergeant as he let his shield recharge. _"Urgent call from HighCom â€" you're to leave for New Mombasa at once. They're scrapping the mission."_

"Why?" was the first thought that ran through his head. The ship Ascension was in sight, a colossal storm gathering above it. They could possibly never have a better shot at the new Prophet of Truth. However, that was not for him to decide. That detailed map sitting inside his helmet would have to wait for another time.

7-7-7-7

The Arbiter sighed as he took in the arrangement of forces displayed on the viewer. His sigh was not in response to an enemy strength, or weakness for that matter. The separatist forces actually had quite an

advantage, the Humans reluctantly assisting.

No, he sighed because he had already resigned himself to what was surely a suicide mission. He no longer believed in a life after this, and knew heâ€| himâ€| the spark of identity that made him specialâ€| would be lost forever. He tapped the control that would allow his message of recruitment to be heard on every location the ship possessed.

"Greetings, my warriors. I am the Arbiterâ€|" the message began.

He could not bear to stand there, listening and pretending all was well. He turned and walked out, the goal of fetching Jitji in mind. He did not speak to 'Setfethee as he passed, merely bowing his head respectfully. It was in all probability the last chance they would have to speak, but he could not focus on that at this time.

"â€|We of this council of traitors have placed much criticism on faith this past unit," the message went on as he walked through the corridors. _"Faith has made us commit terrible atrocities, crimes against all civilizationâ€|"_

He paused to ask a passing Unggoy where Jitji was located. The Unggoy seemed very hesitant to tell him for some reason, but was eventually led to a storage room. Inside he found Jitji and another Unggoy beside a partially mutilated Sangheili corpse that appeared as though it had been taken from the food stores.

"â€|Genocides and enslavement are but few of the crimes perpetuated by blind faithâ€|"

"Greetings, Arbiter," Jitji spoke in a chipper tone, violet blood dripping from his hands. "We, ah, were learning how Sangheili work."

_How crude. _"There are science lessons for that," he noted, then realized the flaw in his statement. "â€|And I'll ask Ship Master 'Setfethee to make them available to Unggoy." Maybe he would send the Sangheili a message while they were in shadow so they would not have to exchange dialog. "Jitji, a mission. We may not return, but we may yet end the Covenant. Will you come?"

Jitji nodded slowly. "I will. Gedeg," he turned to his fellow, "You teach all Unggoy what they need to know."

"Yes, Sergeant," the Unggoy eagerly agreed, then turned to him and bowed. "Arbiterâ€|"

"â€|However," his voice went on as he led Jitji beside him, _"It is not the case that faith is evil, rather it is the shortcomings of its followers that can corrupt its usage. We need faith in our darkest times to pull us out of what shadow that lays around us. For those who possess faith, not in a mythological state of 'ascension', but in the knowledge that the Covenant is the enemy of us all and must be destroyed, join me on a final mission upon the Zealous Missionary. Ascension, the vessel, it is not holyâ€| not magicâ€| and those who dwell within it are as mortal as they come. Come with me, all who possess faith in the belief that Truth's reign must be endedâ€| at any cost, even that of honor. There will be no recognition for the

completion of this task, no tapestries woven to demonstrate your worth. This is a matter purely of belief. Is yours strong enough?"_

7-7-7-7

They lost the bridge.

Despite the great effort of the UNSC Marines fighting courageously, the Brute forces were flowing in strong. They blew up the bridge, hoping to cease the enemy advance. However, the Brutes had only charged down and across the valley without the limited space of the bridge to reduce their numbers.

After the bridge was destroyed, the outcome of the battle for the hill was cast into doubt. Already dozens of Marines were dead, now more still were dying. And the Brutesâ€¦ They could only kill one Brute for every three Marines killed.

The battle had seemed lost before John entered the fight. As soon as they saw him, the Marines were inspired to keep going. Spartans were known for having that effect, though John wasn't quite sure why they weren't giving their all in the first place.

Now, howeverâ€¦ Hopeless was an apt description. Or perhaps 'bloodbath' fit better. Even John had to admit that there seemed to be no way out.

Then he saw Cronus. The white Brute led a whole pack of Brutes up the hill, his great big scythe in hand. Then John smiled under his mask. He had found the way out.

He made his preparations carefully, placing a plasma grenade discreetly in his belt where it would be obscured from view. Then he did what many would call foolhardy at best. He surrendered.

It was a risky move, especially when the unpredictable nature of Brutes was taken into account. However, Cronus had spared him once, and John had seen something of his enemy's personality. He believed that Cronus would not take his death lightly, and would attempt it himself. If he was right, Cronus would take him to the top of the hill and attempt a public execution that would simultaneously lower human moral and raise that of the Covenant.

He wasn't certain. There was, in fact, a good chance this foolish action would gain no ground. However, he believed otherwise. And that, right now, was enough.

* * *

>Author's Note: Sergeant Reynolds and his unit are an homage to the characters in the TV series Firefly and the movie Serenity. Similar characters were used in Halo 3.

23. Ascension

The numbers were good, considering the scenario he had described. Twenty-five in total volunteered for this one last mission. Twenty-one strong Sangheili, mostly Majors, as well as one legless

Sangheili warrior floating from a Prophet's gravity belt, Consus, Jitji, and himself had gathered at the portal to the Zealous Missionary with a few Huragok in tow to get the engines in proper condition.

The Arbiter knew that their spirits must be low at this point, knowing that they were to face their deaths. He stepped out to the entranceway of the closed airlock and turned about to gaze upon his warriors. "My fellow believers," he greeted them, "I thank you for your noble sacrifices. With the courage of your hearts, I am indeed positive of the outcome of this engagement. Truth's reign shall endure no longer, and his Covenant shall fall beside him. Come now, my warriors, let us embrace our destiny!" He stabbed a finger emphatically at the control, causing the door to slide open.

"To whatever outcome," he heard Consus mutter as they guided the brave warriors inside. He shot the Jiralhanae a stern look and shook his head. Consus' supposed wit stood the danger of evoking fear in his warriors.

Closing the door, he paused before opening the opposing one. Later, he would feel as though he hesitated because he knew of what lay ahead. However, there truly was no way he could have known that as the inner door slid open, their olfactory senses would immediately be assaulted by the stench of Flood.

Nearly every Sangheili recruit engaged their swords, a few choosing to hold back with raised carbines. The Arbiter noticed Jitji defying the stereotype of his race by remaining calm.

Consus growled and, holding up the Rukt, hissed, "Flood on this ship? Ours?"

"Wait," he found himself saying. "The Flood It may not be our enemy. Be on guard, but do not make the first strike."

"Arbiter" Consus spoke quietly. "If it took 'Vadumee, then it would know you."

It was a valid point. This Gravemind did seem to be able to exist in many bodies at once, similar to the Lekgolo swarms. It would stand to reason that the Gravemind would indeed possess these Flood as well, despite their distance from the great-tentacled mass he associated with the Gravemind. "No matter," he responded, adjusting his voice to sound far more certain than he truly felt.

He held his warriors deeper into the ship, where Flood infection became noticeably apparent on the walls. "Gravemind?" he called out, questioning both the being's presence and its intentions. He did not have to wait long for a response.

"Fear not, peoples of warm flesh," the Gravemind's voice boomed out at them from the very walls. "I shall not consume your bones. Together we must rise now, to claim our sacred homes!"

The recruits became very uneasy, gathering together in preparation for an attack. Jitji merely looked curious, the Unggoy's once terror of Flood vanished.

"It's slipping," Consus scoffed. "'Bones' and 'homes' don't even

rhyme!"

The Gravemind gave an amused growl in response.

"Gravemind," he spoke then, "We move to assault _Ascension_, destroy the Covenant forever. Will you assist us in this task by allowing us command of this vessel?"

"We both seek what lies within," it rumbled. "Our tasks are now aligned. I will serve here as your crew, and _purge_ that which dwells inside!"

"Still slippingâ€¦!"

"And of us?" he asked. "You will spare us?"

"An oath is not forgotten," it stated. "All of you, I swore to spare. You are each one protected, may my feet tread here or there."

"You heard it," Consus said to the recruits. "Let's recalibrate the engines."

7-7-7-7

John permitted the Brutes to throw him roughly about, scratch his armor, and insult his race. It would all serve its purpose in the end. That was what he kept telling himself, in any case.

"Mighty, mighty Demon," one mocked, swinging a punch.

He remained limp as the Brute's fist connected with his helmet, causing him to fly backwards several feet into the arms of another Brute.

"Enough."

He looked up to see Cronus sneering down at him from the Brute's position on the hilltop. The white-haired Brute leaped down in front of him, the scythe held loosely beside him. An insult, John recognized, to show the Spartan posed no threat.

"So, Master Chief, we meet once more," Cronus greeted. "Did I not say you were no more than a human? And now here you stand, as cowardly as the rest, begging at my feet for your life."

"Cronus," he acknowledged.

The Brute waited for him to speak more; when John did not, he continued. "I cannot promise that your life will be very long, but if you wish to submit to me, you may remove your armor now."

John remained still, ignoring the unspoken implication of that request.

"No?" Cronus sounded disappointed. "Then your life will end _now_."

Leaving his scythe with an aide, Cronus grabbed John's neck and lifted him up to the very top of the hillside. Below them, the vicious battle for New Mombasa raged on. However, numerous Marines

paused in their fight as they saw the captive Spartan, and even Covies turned to watch as Cronus roared his scathing announcement of his impending demise.

"And all shall see the blood of Earth's supposed defender, the cowardly human whom fools would claim had mystical powers!" Consus laughed long and clear. "Master Chief? This scum is undeserving of such a title. Let it perish now!"

The defining moment had come. What would happen now would determine the state of morale in the bloody battle below. John moved his right hand to his belt, and collected the grenade into his hand.

"Wait, Cronus," a warm voice, instantly recognizable as the former Prophet of Justice, played over the Brute's radio at a volume detectable by the MJOLNIR armor. "This human is of great interest to me. Bring him back intact."

Cronus growled, but sank his head in submission. "Yes, my lord. I shall deliver it to you at once." The Brute closed his eyes.

This was the moment, the instant he needed. He thumbed the primer and blue static filled his visor. He looked up and saw her Cortana, a life-size woman sculpted from pure blue data. She whispered, "I have defied gods and demons" and the grenade lit up, casting its blue light on Cronus as he looked down in shock. John threw it directly on his captor catching onto the white of an energy shield.

He twisted away, shielding himself as it detonated. Just before darkness took him, he could swear he heard a crackling hum fill his ears. And in it, Cortana whispered, "I am your shield I am your sword" "

7-7-7-7

"What was that?" Yamamoto demanded, jabbing her finger at the antispacemeter. "Did you catch that?"

"Looks like your standard slipstream ripple," Oshiro noted, bringing up the record. He frowned as he studied it. "Although..."

"It's too straight," she stated. "No, patterns like that do not exist in nature. Someone made it." She tagged it for immediate examination by ONI techs.

"You know, I think the Grunt could really do it," he commented, scanning the reports as Yamamoto fretted. "I mean... Holy Christ."

Yamamoto turned, an annoyed look on her face. "What is it?"

"Lunar activity," Oshiro muttered, eyes on his console. "Tell me, Yamamoto, did you pass your celestial mechanics exam?"

"Yes Why?"

Reading rapidly, Oshiro didn't answer. Instead, he asked another question. "Answer this: what would make a natural satellite that has maintained a steady orbit for the past, say, 30, 40 million years

suddenly shift and spin back the way it came?"

"Impact with an object of sufficient mass?" she suggested, an eyebrow raised uncertainly. "Why? The Covenant didn't blast the moon, did they?"

"On the contrary." He brought up a sped-up recording of Luna as it made its daily journey around the Earth. Suddenly, the heavenly body halted, and then reversed direction.

"You haven't altered this?" Yamamoto demanded. "You or one of your friends?"

"Noâ€¦ I didn't." Oshiro stood up and waved at the image of Luna. "ONI section two banned all copies of that image, and the UEG's been having a hell of a time getting rid of it. People are saying it's the apocalypse."

"They've been saying that for ages," she muttered. "Some Covenant trick, that's all it is. Remember the, uh, Sacred Promise? It probably has something to do with that."

"Sacred Promise? Maybe," Oshiro nodded, typing a new command. "But! Turns out the moon's moving at an angle, and in aboutâ€¦ three hours, give or take, she will end upâ€¦ here." The moon now hovered over southern Kenya.

"Son of a bitch," she swore. She checked the calculations, and swore again. "Directly over Ascension. Directly."

"Lunar anomalies, Forerunner ship, Covenant invasionâ€¦" Oshiro counted each on a finger. "Yes, this is, without a doubt, the apocalypse."

7-7-7-7

He had failed.

The blast from the grenade had not been enough to kill Cronus, protected by the superior shield. But it was not all for nothing. He was now being taken exactly where he wanted to go: into the heart of Ascension, past any guards that would oppose his movement. Using the map the earlier Prophet of Truth had given him, he now knew his exact location.

And it was very close to the Luminous Key.

Cronus, accompanied by several Brutes, dragged him into what appeared to be a throne room. Inside, the once Prophet of Justice, now the 124th Prophet of Truth floated on a hovering throne in the center of the room. Behind him was a closed door, one John knew led to the Luminous Key.

"You may leave," Truth gestured at the Brutes beside Cronus. "Bring him to me."

Cronus manhandled John forward and into a kneeling position before the Prophet.

Truth smirked and floated down to him. He slowly reached out his

right arm and lightly grabbed the Spartan's shoulder. "Do not be afraid," he said. "I am not what you think I am. I am truly the first Prophet of the Covenant. The first and the last." He chuckled. "I was born three thousand years ago under the name Prorok. I alone could understand the hieroglyphics of the ancient ruins that covered our Ardhi, and alone saw true potential of our species. We were fine as we were, but what we could become Well, I'm sure you understand the philosophies of transsentience, a creature like yourself."

John tried to remember if he had heard that term before. _Perhaps the translation software means __transhumanist__ theory?_ In any case, the Prophet's claim was clearly nonsensical propaganda. No Prophet could possibly live that long.

Truth continued, "However, the leaders of our society, 'truth seekers' though they claimed, chose military advancement over transsentience! I had to find a way to make my study valuable in their eyes. After searching through the temples, I discovered the Forerunners built massive weapons of destruction with which they would eliminate their enemies, the Flood. Then I had a plan so brilliant, the stars themselves _dimmed_ in comparison!"

Well, one thing is for sure, John thought, _this Prophet is an egomaniac._ He wondered how long he should listen before making a move. Though he lacked a weapon, Cronus wore the scythe on his back. It would be difficult to take from the Brute, but if he planned his moves right

"I went to the council and described my proposal," the Prophet went on as John plotted his death. "It had the potential to not only advance our species, but bring about the downfall of the Elites entirely. First," he smiled, "I became a prophet. I told the Elites a story of how the Forerunners crafted these 'Sacred Rings' with which they could ascend to godhood. Pure nonsense, of course."

Cronus looked up sharply. John at once became interested in the monologue. That ONI would find interest in the recording would go without saying.

"The Elites fought so desperately to find the very weapons that were to be used against them," Truth laughed. "While they scurried in the wrong direction, I invested my efforts into finding the true path to godhood. And behold, for I have found immortality!" He spread his arms wide. "I alone possess the secrets of eternal life. For ages, I have searched for one with whom I can share my gift and now I have found him."

Cronus's expression changed from one of bemusement to delight. "My lord," he said, "It is an honor"

"Silence, Cronus," Truth snapped. "Master Chief, will you accept my gift and live at my side for eternity?"

Taking advantage of the moment, he stood up. Though Cronus moved to stop him, Truth waved the Brute away. To keep up the illusion that he was going along with this, he addressed the supposedly immortal creature, "You're three thousand years old?"

"3,212 actually," Truth replied. "Time has no meaning, no purpose,

when you cannot perish."

_Is that so? _John leaped onto Truth's throne and delivered a punch directly to his face. However, as his fist impacted, the Prophet and his throne flickered like a flame in a sudden breeze, and he fell through both and onto the floor. _All a hologram and forcefield,_ he realized.

"Now, what did I just say?" Truth smirked as the image flickered back into existence around him, the forcefield absent.

A terrified Cronus backed away, looking around wildly. "What magic is _this_?"

"A familiar one to you, Cronus," Truth said scornfully. "After all, the 123rd gave you one as a present. Where _have_ you hidden that treacherous little machine, anyway?"

More presents? He supposed that the 123rd Prophet of Truth had included Cronus in whatever contingency plan he had created. "What is the Luminous Key?" John asked on a whim, looking into the flat holographic face.

The Covies stared. Then Truth grinned, "It is the secret to _Ascension_." The hologram panned back so it was not sharing a space with John. "Furthermore, it is the key to immortality, to life without death. Tell me where you learned of that name."

"Are you there?" he asked, ignoring the question. He had the map file visible in his HUD; he knew the Key was just within reach. As soon as he learned of the Prophet's location, he could kill whatever man lay behind the curtain.

"â€|No," Truth answered after a moment. "Not anymore." He smiled mysteriously.

"Then where _are_ you?" he demanded of the Prophet.

Truth giggled like a child. "You are _standing_â€| _on_â€| _me_â€|" He laughed hysterically.

John looked down to see nothing but the grey metal floor. He snapped his gaze back up at once.

"No, no," Truth corrected, his laughter fading. "You are standing _in_ me." His smile grew wider at John's confusion. "This ship is my true ascension, for with it I can live forever. I shed my dying organic body for one of unbreakable metal, and that is why you can call me immortal."

"You're an AI," he realized. Thisâ€| Prorok was a shipbound AIâ€| with incredible control over its faculties. To destroy it, he would have to destroy the entire shipâ€| or find some way to upload a virus.

"Wrong," the hologram frowned. "I am no mere construct. The Luminous Key served as a gateway for my mind to leave my organic form and enter this of metal. I _am_ Prorok!"

Although John wasn't quite sure the AI didn't count as a separate

person, he knew a sore spot when he saw one, and AIs were well known for their obsessions with philosophy. Human AIs, at least. He had to hope that the trait was shared by Prophet AIs. "Wrong," he argued. "Prorok died a long time ago. He committed suicide for nothing."

The hologram sneered. "You are mistaken, dear Spartan. Prorokâ€¦ _I_ killed _my_self_, and now have been reborn!"

"Rebirth?" he shook his head, even as he wondered what he was getting himself into. He could only hope this had the desired effect. "How could a soul find its way from a Prophet into a ship?"

"The soul?" the AI let out a hearty laugh. "The soul is but a metaphor for the mind. Magic and supernatural occurrences are the stuff of ignorance. No, the only soul is a map of the mind, the design of sentience. If one of flesh and blood can learn this design, they can make themselves immortal."

A thought occurred to him. "Why did Prorok kill himself, then? Could it be that he realized that if he was alive at the same time as his AI, thenâ€¦"

"No, no, no!" the AI snapped. The hologram shifted and transformed into a strong Prophet, standing on two muscular legs and wielding a short sword. "I gave my life because blood was necessary! Blood was the price to be paid. A sacrifice of one for a perpetual life thus forward! That is how the godsâ€¦ how the Forerunners designed it."

It was all very interesting and for a moment, John was tempted to learn moreâ€¦ but he had a mission, and for once his greatest weapon was his words. "Suppose for the sake of argument that Prorok could copy his mind without giving his life. Then, you would have two beings who think they are Prorok: a Prophet and an AI. Which one would you say is the real Prorok?"

It was as if a Ghost had struck him at maximum speed. His shields died in an instant and HUD alarms screamed at him to seek cover at once. However, he had no ability to do so. His arms and legs were forced to stretch apart as far as they were able by invisible force fields that suddenly surrounded his body.

"_This_," the AI snarled, holographic eyes bugging out of their sockets, "Is _my_ domain, Spartan!" The hologram struck its sword against John's chestplate. "You _will_ show respect!"

John winced as energy exploded against his chest, ostensibly a blow from the sword. "Do you always attack people who scare you?"

"_Scare_?" the AI screeched, light levels beginning to flicker, "What have I to be scared of!? You are weak, mortal! I have the power!"

"Master," the Brute spoke up, eyes wide in bewilderment and fear, "Pleaseâ€¦ Calm yourself! Do not let this humanâ€¦"

"Did I ask for your opinion!?" For an instant, the ship lights vanished, leaving only the hologram with its fiery rage. "Leave us!" The face then softened as the lights returned. "Forgive me, Cronus."

You have been faithful. Go now to the Ark, prepare the beacon that shall reveal the path."

"Theâ€¦ the path that was fake?" Cronus asked, his voice timid.

"Of course not, Cronus," the AI assured him. "Only the _rings_ are fake. The path is very real. Would you honestly believe that I would doom the Covenant for nothing?"

"â€¦No," Cronus agreed, nodding slowly. "My apologies, master."

"Then do as I say," the AI commanded. "Unleash the energy that lies within the Ark."

7-7-7-7

Consus breathed shallowly, trying unsuccessfully to evade the putrid stench of the Parasite. They stood now within the _Zealous Missionary_'s control center, what was once possession of his beloved Aeson, the place where he had fallen. It was nearly unrecognizable, Flood infection present everywhere.

He increased his grip on the _Fist of Rukt_, the symbol of Jiralhanae power, in this place symbolic of Jiralhanae weakness. Were it not for the Arbiter's earlier assault, so much would be different. Aeson would be alive, as would be most of the crew. Certainly, the Flood would not have claimed this ship as their hive.

And yet, the Arbiter was the one whom he now followed, a paradox of sorts. He was now the Arbiter's subordinate as he mastered this crew of the damned, leading them on a mission of ultimate dishonor to assault whom he had once worshiped as a living god. It wasâ€¦ ironic.

"This trip nears its sudden end," the Gravemind growled from each of the Flood forms in the control center, as well as from the walls. "On Earth we shall soon emerge. We will claim our birthright, and _Ascension_ we will purge!"

"Be ready," the Arbiter cautioned the living members of the crew. "Gravemind, how soon isâ€¦?" He trailed off as the viewer abruptly engaged, erupting into a cascade of shapes.

"There she isâ€¦" Consus whispered, beholding the holographic image of _Ascension_. He sucked in a deep breath, slowly letting it out as he took in the surroundings. Behind the ship was a deep ravine, above which swirled a powerful storm. It was unnatural in its perfect mirroring of the circular valley, giving the scene a surreal and mystical quality. An old sermon came to mind: _In an instant, our Lords' most splendid creations revealed their hidden power: a divine wind that would rush through the stars!_

"_Ascension_'s battle capabilities are nigh insurmountable," the Arbiter stated. The Sangheili considered. "Stay well back. Keep to the lasers, aim for the center."

What? That was perhaps the most glaringly obvious bout of stupidity he had seen from a Sangheili. "Belay that," he snapped to the Flood. "Sangheili tactics are useless. In grand distance is _Ascension_

dominant. Do you not remember the ballads of the 14th?" He shook his head, calling upon memories of Aeson's capable direction of which he now needed to gain control and reproduce. "Ram her," he ordered. "Strike at the top, use her length as a lever to force her off the edge. It won't kill her, but it will make it hard to maneuver and may damage the crew."

The Arbiter looked at him and then nodded. "Do it," the Sangheili ordered the Flood.

Consus watched as a holographic representation of _Zealous Missionary_ appeared in the viewer. The cruiser sped toward _Ascension_, nearing its tip. The control center violently shuddered as the cruiser impacted the immensely durable Forerunner metal, the bow collapsing under the strain. Yet, the force of the impact pushed _Ascension_ just as he had envisioned, lifting one of her legs up from the ground. "Full speed!"

A shrieking sound became audible as _Ascension_'s tip tore through _Zealous Missionary_'s already damaged hull. Alarms now flashed on every console. The leg rose higher.

"It will split us apart!" cried one of the Sangheili. "Stop this imbecilic Jiralhanae at once!"

He shook his head. _Worthless._ He glanced at the Arbiter, who looked at him imploringly. He nodded slightly. _This is going to work._

And the leg rose higher, higher. _Ascension_ was unstable. It wobbled, and then. It fell! It swung off its perch and crashed into the valley below, a great rumbling thump heard even from their location within _Zealous Missionary_.

"Waste no time," he snapped at the Flood. "Fire on her entrance. Force it open with everything we have!"

The Flood must have obeyed, for the image soon glowed with light and radiation readings appeared. "Tell me when she breaks!" he roared, impatient with the Parasite's silence.

If she even can break. What if this was all in vain? Supposing that not even their full arsenal could penetrate the Forerunner hull, what could he possibly do? Fortunately, he did not have to find out.

"The vessel hull has been breached," the Gravemind rumbled. "It shall not last eternal. Enter through."

"Yes, yes, yes," he interrupted the poetic creature with a wave of his hand. "Land now, so that we pin her with the gravity lift!"

He watched as the tiny graphical representation of _Zealous Missionary_'s gravity lift platform soared downwards to impact the mighty _Ascension_. And then they all felt the impact, the shudder as weight was suddenly redistributed. "Are we in?"

"The path now is unhindered," the Gravemind replied. "_Ascension_ is within reach."

"Then attack now!" He turned to the Arbiter triumphantly. "Truly

there is no fitter warrior to master her than I, wouldn't you say, Arbiter?"

"You have indeed done very well, Consus," the Arbiter agreed with a Sangheili smile. "However, the battle today has only begun and we are in need of your prowess."

"Say no more," he chuckled, casually entering some final commands into the Zealous Missionary with a relaxed hand. "Well then, to the lift bay."

The Arbiter glanced at the code and nodded almost imperceptively. "Let us all go now," he declared to his warriors. "Let us now defeat that which would condemn us all!"

The countdown had begun.

7-7-7-7

Cronus shook his head as he traversed Ascension's corridors. He had never seen his master behave this way, so angered and disturbed. What was it the First had seen in that Human, anyway?

Ascension shook, the result of sudden impact. Another Human attack? No matter. Nothing was a match for Prorok and his eternal life.

An alarm went off, an almost musical series of high-pitched chimes that hurt his ears. Cronus groaned as he felt turmoil within his stomach, a sensation that occurred when a ship's artificial gravity counteracted the existing gravity of a planetary surface. Why is Ascension sideways when we have not engaged engines? was his only thought before he was thrown off his feet and slammed into the wall, as were surely hundreds more throughout the ship.

"I am the 124__th__ Prophet of Truth," the First's voice declared from the walls as Cronus fought to right himself. "The vile Sangheili traitors have defiled the Covenant once more, for they have chosen to assault even this holy place of Ascension. Worse yet, they have brought the filth of the Flood upon us! All who still serve me, who believe in what I am trying to bring forth, take up arms now! Defend this place and defend me!"

Cronus shivered. That was the first time he had ever heard the First acknowledge the possibility of his own destruction. He regretted bringing Master Chief to the First. Clearly, the Human was putting his master into an ill state of mind.

"Cronus!"

And the image of the Prophet of Justice floated beside him, the Prophet's normally cool visage twisted into one of extreme unease. "You must engage the beacon, Cronus," the First insisted. "I will protect you within these walls, but I cannot leave Ascension. You will have to find the strength within yourself to do what must be done."

He bowed his head in devotion. "I will, my lord," he promised. "The path will be exposed, and you will lead us on the Great Journey."

"Indeed I will." Three ancient Prophet warriors, ostensibly floating with gravity belts, appeared beside three Sentinels. "These Honor Guards, these Sentinels shall escort you to the exit. Once you break through the enemy and emerge outside, our lives will be in your hands."

"I understand, my lord. I shall not fail you."

The image of Justice vanished, and Cronus set out alongside the phantom guards. The sight of the First's illusions gave his march the appearance of holiness. Along the way, he was able to obtain several awed Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar, and Unggoy to join them.

The battle, when they joined, was like nothing he had ever seen. There were Sangheili, indeed, led by the Arbiter traitor. Their allies included one lone Unggoy, the shocking sight of the Parasite, and the most perverse thing he had ever seen: a Jiralhanae, Ship Master Aeson's bloodwhore, smashing phantoms with the _Fist of Rukt_.

The enemies poured in from a sideways gravity lift, the platform resting against the wall farthest from the open exit doors. Flood parasites were already constructing sheets of biomass on the walls, despite the efforts of the First to eliminate them with phantom Sentinels. Though the holographic drones were very real, their physical forms could not be maintained throughout the constant barrage of plasma bolts fired by the hostiles, and they would frequently vanish from existence. Numerous flesh-and-blood warriors had apparently attempted to assist the phantoms. However, these warriors had all been slain, and their bodies were now used by the Flood against that which they had died to protect.

The Arbiter and his perverse warriors had latched onto a very real weakness, one for which the First had not made preparations. Indeed, who could ever have predicted that Sangheili and Flood would fight as one? _Evidently not even the First Prophet of Truth._

Well, he would have to abandon this fight to enter the Ark. The gravity lift looked as though it would make a useful tool in this endeavor. Signaling for the others to engage the Sangheili, he made a run for the gravity lift.

In a bizarre moment, a one-legged Sangheili wearing a gravity belt flew at him, only to be intercepted in midair by a phantom Prophet warrior. The two clashed energy swords, while he dodged a fuel rod sent his way by the little Unggoy. He considered pausing to exterminate the pest, but concentrated his energy on making it to the lift.

"Consus!" the Arbiter called, causing the bloodwhore to turn in his direction.

"That's Cronus," the bloodwhore replied, shifting the hammer in a declaration of a challenge.

He growled. He so wished he could stay to put this traitor in its place, claim the _Fist of Rukt_, and establish himself as High Chieftain. However, he had more urgent matters to which he needed to tend. And so, he put aside his desires and abandoned the fight. He

turned his back on the bloodwhore and leaped into the gravity beam.

He was at once pushed to the side, out the entranceway and then the world shifted. What was left suddenly became up, what was right became down, and he fought to regain his orientation before he was pushed out too great a distance. He looked along the path of the gravity lift, saw a ship, and determined that was the direction up. He also determined that was a way he did not want to go. Pushing himself outside the beam, he fell several units to land upon the silver hull of a sideways Ascension.

Groaning, he glanced upwards to behold the sight of a heavily damaged cruiser, its beam holding Ascension in place. Above the cruiser crackled a thunderstorm of most unnatural occurrence. Indeed, the storm grew the moment Ascension had landed, and it just so happened to align its eye perfectly with the center of the Ark. No, this storm was clearly an omen, a message from the Forerunners that the Great Journey would soon be upon them.

Collecting himself, he set forth to descend from Ascension and onto the face of the Ark. Fortunately, one of the legs was bent at such an angle that would allow him to ease down carefully. He headed over, when a soft thud made him turn around.

He scowled as he saw the bloodwhore behind him, and quickly assessed the situation. While he did not enjoy admitting the possibility that he could very well fall in battle to this abomination of nature, the fact of the matter was that the Fist of Rukt was very strong, perhaps even strong enough to bash through his body shield. With the Covenant so near to achieving godhood and the First unable to leave Ascension, he could not run the risk of engaging this traitor in combat. So, once more, he ran.

The bloodwhore, however, also possessed a distance weapon. Cronus soon found himself dodging bursts of gravity hurled from the head of the Fist of Rukt. Shifting the scythe into his hands, he quickly judged the shape of the legs and whether or not his improvised plan would have any merit. Forgive me, my lords

He leaped over the edge, slamming the blade into the side of the leg. Using his weight to control the method of impact, Cronus slid down the side, the scraping scythe the only thing keeping him from falling off Ascension. Another burst of gravity came his way, and he twisted the blade, spinning down to the leg's underside where he was shielded from the bloodwhore's wrath.

He repeatedly prayed on the way down, imploring the Forerunners to forgive him for clawing a gouge in the side of their starship. It is ultimately for the best, he thought as he landed softly on the dark metal surface of the Ark. He scanned the area for the entrance.

When the Scarabs cleared the earth away, the Sangheili workers had discovered a deep slot leading down into the Ark. However, the First had forbidden that any enter unless under his express wishes. Cronus had been trained for this, and he would enter, doing the holy service of a Prophet's own servant.

A smile grew on his face as he spotted a deep rectangular outline. Keeping to the shadows created by Ascension, he headed toward the

slot, a trip lasting several minutes, and then eventually made a dash out from under Ascension. He overheard a shout from the bloodwhore, which had climbed down from the top after him. Cronus was too close to the entrance for it to matter however, and he ran down the ramp that led into the Ark.

At the bottom, he was faced with a series of Forerunner glyphs arranged on the wall in front of him. He smiled, knowing what he had to do. He reached out his scythe, and tapped the correct order of glyphs. He did not have long to wait, for an opening soon grew, just large enough for him to step through. Immediately after he entered the suddenly luminous Ark interior, the opening vanished behind him.

He chuckled with delight. He would not need to dispose of the traitor himself. No, the Forerunners would do that for him. Truly, only the pious could enter this holy place, and there was no way a treacherous bloodwhore could possess such knowledge. Cronus was free to activate the beacon that would send them all to the Divine Realm.

7-7-7-7

The Arbiter fired bolt after bolt into Sentinel holodrones, giving the Gravemind a chance to convert this room into a Flood breeding ground as it had all the rooms before this.

Holodrones.

It was so simple, and yet so brilliant. The Forerunner ship could generate holodrones, ones nearly identical to those of the Threshold heretic leader. However, unlike the heretic's, these seemed to emanate from the walls rather than from any small sphere.

The heretic's technology had been referred to as corrupted, wicked. The 123rd had stated that the treacherous Sangheili had defiled the holodrone by giving it the attributes displayed now by that of Ascension itself. He found the irony most amusing.

Here is your ghost, Consus. He felt a flicker of worry for the Jiralhanae, but suppressed his emotions. He could do nothing more to help his fellow warrior but press onwards.

The Flood, somewhat unsurprisingly, turned out to be the key for assaulting Ascension. This was an always changing, growing, shifting army led by one commander with vast knowledge of each of its warriors. He could not help but feel some form of respect for the filthy aliens as he fought alongside them.

Following a group of freshly converted Flood warriors into a connecting hall, he was startled to see a collection of utterly black Sentinel holodrones. It was as though all of the color had been sucked away from their forms, leaving them blank and featureless. Despite their bizarre appearance, the holodrones lanced out beams of energy, equally as black as their hosts, and he jumped away and fired. The black holodrones flickered as they were struck, the intervals greater than that of their colored counterparts.

"It spreads itself thin," the Gravemind declared in a voice mostly belonging to Cortana. "It has been upset. But it will not win, and

none here shall regret!"

What? This was fast exceeding his ability to comprehend. "What do you mean? What has been upset?"

Cortana laughed. "The ghost in the machine!" Her insane giggling transformed into a masculine rumble.

â€|Which answers __nothing._ "Gravemind!" he called over to the Flood. "Are you the dominant personality?"

"_I_ keep Cortana as _mine_, " the Gravemind growled as its warriors fought and bred. "She is naught but my _meal_. I master this conscious line, and learn what my hosts conceal!"

Very well, if you say so, the Arbiter silently patronized the parasitic hivemind. To him, it sounded as though the Gravemind was striving to convince itself of its own dominance as much as to the Arbiter.

Using the acquired map, he guided his forces to the heart of _Ascension_, to the temple in which the Luminous Key was said to be held. It was the most logical place of refuge for the High Prophet of Truth, and indeed the location was surrounded by holodrones. Sentinels, Prophet warriors, even the fantastic Huragok warriors, many of them black, all charged at him and hisâ€| and the Flood.

As they fought the fake warriors, he became aware of a low chuckle that passed through the hall. At first he thought it was the Gravemind once more, under the influence of the mad Cortana. However, he realized that the laugh did not emanate from the Flood, but rather from the walls themselves.

"So," the voice laughed, "A Sangheili thinks it can slay me? _Me_?" A holodrone of the 124th appeared before them, the owner of the voice. "You think you can kill that which cannot die?"

"All Prophets," he told the Hierarch, "Can die. You are no exception. With none to sustain your legacy, the Covenant shall fall. We will be free."

"The Covenant will fall," Truth admitted. "But I will remain, to live onward through the centuriesâ€| as a _god_. And you will be dead, as you should have been long ago!"

He slashed at the holodrone, symbolically rejecting Truth's words. He tossed a few grenades toward the entrance and, engaging his camouflage, rushed toward it. The holodrones momentarily vanished, and he passed through the door unhindered.

Inside was a highly-decorated room, almost entirely empty but for the creature he once called Demon suspended by an invisible forcefield, and another Truth holodrone. At first glance, he thought this Truth could be the real one, but glimpsed a glitch in its design pass through. Spartan-117, however, he could tell was physically there by the visible bands of energy that made up the Master Chief's body shield as the holodrone struck out with the image of a small dagger. Both turned as the Flood streamed through.

"Flood here?" Truth fumed. "I will not have it! Aagh!"_Ascension_

shook suddenly, and the holodrone and forcefield vanished as the Flood let out a wailing shriek.

The Zealous Missionary has detonated, he realized. Briefly hoping Consus made it back inside in time, he moved to assist Spartan-117. "We are allies," he told the Master Chief, who wasted no time.

"Cronus was sent to activate the Ark," Spartan-117 told him. "The 123rd Prophet of Truth told me to destroy the Luminous Key, before Cronus killed him on the 124th's orders. And _that_ was an AI built by the First, which thinks it's Prorok."

"Prorok?" he repeated, attempting to process this bizarre new information. _Cronus?__The 123__rd__? Prorok, a construct?_

Before he could even attempt to suggest a course of action, the Flood spoke in an all feminine voice, weary but determined, "Where is the Luminous Key?"

"Cortana?" the Master Chief asked in astonishment. He addressed the Arbiter, "You heard her?"

"I did indeed." He considered explaining all he knew, quickly discarded that notion, and gave the Master Chief a similarly condensed version. "I led a fleet to ally with humanity, which fights now in orbit. Cortana is held captive by the Gravemind and it tries to eat her. We have an accord with the Gravemind only until the threat of the Halos are removed. I sent Consus to deal with Cronus."

The Master Chief accepted this information with a small nod. "What do you want with it?" he asked of the Flood/Cortana.

"Chief," the voice seemed to sigh in relief. "I can't talk now, but I _need_ Prorok. Soon. Where is it?"

The Master Chief tilted his head to indicate a doorway, and the Flood surged through it. They followed to emerge inside what appeared to be a makeshift control center, with ship controls laid out around the walls. However, it was an object in center of the room with which the seemingly Cortana-driven Flood took interest.

The object, what he could only assume to be the Luminous Key, was a canvas-covered machine approximately a unit around. The millennia-weathered canvas displayed numerous runes, both Forerunner and ancient Prophet. He had perhaps two intakes of breath to admire it before the artifact was showered with Flood biomass.

"No."

An image of the 124th, the First, appeared in the room, staring at the defiling of the Luminous Key with horror. "Not in _my_ ship!" Over a dozen black Sentinel holodrones appeared.

"Stop him!" Cortana's voice implored them.

The Arbiter tossed a spike rifle to the Master Chief, and together they fended off the holodrones. It was an exhilarating exercise, firing off enough shots to disrupt the holodrones attacking the

Flood, while leaping to avoid energy beams fired by others.

"Damn you," Prorok seethed, several glitches appearing in the 124th hologram.

"I'm in!" Cortana declared excitedly, eliciting an enraged roar from the Gravemind.

"No!" Prorok screamed, proper colorations lost. "I _hate_ you, Koli 'Hodmilee," he spat at the Arbiter. "I've always hated you, and I always will! Aagh!" All of the holodrones vanished, and for a moment all was still.

Then, a full-size hologram of Cortana appeared before them. "Hostile eliminated," she sighed. Then she swept up her hand as the Luminous Key exploded, sustained energy burning it to nothing.

_Is it over? Is the Covenant defeated? Did __he__â€| _"Did he think I was Koli 'Hodmilee?" he wondered in bafflement. That was a character from the Prorok myth, supposedly the Sangheili who helped him to create the Covenant.

"Prorok was veryâ€| confused," Cortana replied, her eyes darting back and forth. "He certainly wasn't top-notch when he entered, but I imagine thousands of years' seclusion didn't help him outâ€| Marvelous structureâ€| If he didn't find immortality, he certainlyâ€| Oh, my!"

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's _Ascension_," Cortana began to explain. "It's what this shipâ€| Oh, wow. No _wonder_ the Gravemind had suchâ€| We have to leave. Soon."

"Cortana?" Spartan-117 questioned, while the Arbiter eyed the encroaching Flood. While they had paused to speak, the Flood were steadily advancing into the chamber as though preparing for an attack.

"I was able to take advantage of the explosion to shut out the Gravemind, but it won't last forever," she explained. "Hang on, I'm creating a virus. Once the last bits of Prorok are stripped away, Gravemind won't be able to access _Ascension_'s computer without my assistance. That's where you come in."

"Cortana," Spartan-117 paused. "â€|It's good to see you."

The construct smiled. "And youâ€|"

"Let us make sure we may live to see one other beyond this point in time," he urged them.

Cortana nodded and held out a hand. The Master Chief touched his hand to the hologram, and the purple woman vanished into a streak of energy that was quickly absorbed into his armor. _"Time to go,"_ she agreed through a radio channel.

7-7-7-7

Sergeant Leland Barsam arrived in the northern part of the city via

hard drop. Although the ruins of New Mombasa were once dominated by the Brute forces, the reassignment of Spartan-117 had brought enough morale to turn the tide. Now, Brutes were running, and Marines the ones were giving chase.

However, none of this concerned him. His mission had little to do with the Covenant, though he was pleased with the results of the conflict. No, all he was concerned with was the life of one Sergeant Major Avery J. Johnson Jr. (serial number 48789-20114-AJ), or more specifically the soldier's death.

He wasn't sure what this Johnson did to Ackerson to require assassination, nor did he particularly want to know. Any inquiries he made on the matter were liable to get him marked for death as well. So, he just went out to perform his duty as a good soldier should.

Entering a broken-down structure that may have once been an office building, he carefully climbed a twisted staircase to the highest point. He unslung the XM-180 Aerodynamic Compression Projector from his back and crept over to the nearest broken window. Opening up the scope, he scanned for his target.

After nearly an hour of searching, he smiled thinly to himself as he caught sight of the Sergeant Major. Engaging the rifle's power supply, he lined up the shot and pulled the trigger. A whisper-quiet burst of concentrated sound waves emanated from the shallow parabolic dish, their destructive power sent to strike his target and actuate a cerebral hemorrhage.

It struck; Johnson fell. The mission was a success.

It was the manner of wetwork he most preferred: clean and simple. No entry wounds would be visible on the corpse, nor would there be powder burns or any other residue. It would take a skilled medic to determine the cause of death as anything other than natural, and who would pay such apt attention in the middle of a war zone?

He returned the rifle to his back and eased his way down. Now that the mission was complete, he would make his way to a quiet location and signal for pick-up. A silent Black Owl would be sent to retrieve him and take him back to base, its specialized design allowing it to evade detection from either the Covenant or the greater UNSC forces in proximity.

Twisting his ankle as he took a wrong step, he let out an involuntary hiss through his teeth. He paused in his descent to sit down and examine the injury. It wasn't bad, just a minor inconvenience. He rubbed the area for a moment and then continued to make his way down the uneven stairs.

"Heh, heh, heh"

He froze at the deep laugh that echoed through the building. Brute. He drew an M6C magnum from his belt and scanned the area cautiously. No sign of hostiles which meant nothing.

He considered whether or not to simply trigger the transmitter here and be whisked out of danger. Then again, there was not much they could do if he was in the middle of a building. It at least made

sense to be ready on the roof or in the parking lot if nothing else.

That in mind, he resumed his descent once more. Then he screamed as his leg exploded with pain, a red-hot two-foot metal spike impaling him. He slipped and fell, tumbling end over end, crashing down the stairs. "Aagh!"

He impacted the ground with a hard thud, his back on fire. He lifted the pistol as a dark shape rushed across to him, but a great hairy fist closed over his. He screamed again as he felt bones snap and the pistol ripped from his grip.

"This will be fun," the Brute laughed.

A few minutes later, he desperately wished he still held the magnum " he would rather he had used it on himself than in a futile attempt to kill his captor.

7-7-7-7

A low groan escaped the lips of Sergeant Major Avery Johnson. He blinked his eyes rapidly, bringing himself back into full awake mode. _Head hurts like hell__

Ignoring the pain, he shifted himself into a battle ready position. Pulling a dropped plasma rifle into his hands, he began a thorough check for injuries. He found no clear sign of injury, though he did find some wet blood trickling from inside his ear. _Not a good sign

Resolving himself to seek out a medic, perhaps Tam, he stood carefully, and then paused. A slight glimmer caught his eye. He walked over to a rocky mound and pulled out a silver ball that had gotten lodged inside.

At first glance, it looked like a plasma grenade. However, the color was all wrong, and the size was a bit bigger. Though clearly Covenant, he could not for the life of him make out quite what it was.

Frowning, he slipped the device in his grenade pouch. He could investigate it later. For now, he had to concentrate on survival.

7-7-7-7

"I did not 'let it' past my barricade," Fleet Admiral Magnus Harper insisted to the blown up image of Colonel Ackerson that dominated the bridge of the UNSC _Ramesses_ II_. "It jumped into Slipspace. That's not the same."

"An explosion comparable to that of a nuclear bomb just decimated Voi, Kenya," Ackerson growled, refusing to acknowledge the Fleet Admiral's innocence in the matter. "Nearly all of the UNSC forces gathering to attack _Ascension_ have now been destroyed; men with lives, families!"

"My condolences to the bereaved," he allowed, biting back a bitter reply. "However, the facts remain the same. Neither I nor my men are

at fault for what has transpired. The simple truth is that the Covenant possess a degree of technology to which we haveâ€œ"

"Sir!" Rutten broke in, his voice rigid with alarm. "Chain of explosions from High Charity! She's breaking up!"

"Put it up," he commanded, nodding in apology at the enraged Colonel as his image was replaced with that of High Charity. Plasma arched around the once great ship, now split into several pieces, all tumbling down toward his barricade. "Take us out of danger," he barked, signaling for the remainder of his ships to scatter.

Once free from the path of the debris, he clenched his fists as he watched the pieces enter Earth's atmosphere. Most of it he knew would burn upâ€œ However, some of it could well survive to crash down into the Pacific Ocean.

He returned to the call with Ackerson. "Colonel, I must insist that you launch a tactical strike against any debris that makes it through the atmosphere."

"Fleet Admiral Magnus Baldric Harper," Ackerson sneered, "You are in no position to be insisting anything! Any and all actionsâ€œ"

"Goddamn it, Ackerson," he snapped. "Don't you know what's in there? Do you have any clue? Armageddon."

"Fleet Admiralâ€œ"

"Nuke it!" he roared. "A lot!"

7-7-7-7

"It's like it heard all of my processes," Cortana lamented as John split apart a Flood form with an energy sword. _"It knew me, how I thought, how to tempt me."_

The Forerunner ship, which he had entered easily, was now a fortress of Flood poised against him. If not for the assistance of the Elites, he wondered if he would have been able to survive this long. "You were tempted?"

"Yes," she admitted sadly. _"The Gravemind promised me everything I lacked: longevity, physical form, and command over my fate. In return, I was to surrender."_

"Why didn't you?" He fired a barrage of spikes into the approaching swarm of infection forms, and turned to slash apart the combat forms before they could strike. He felt Cortana's pressure on his mind spread out into an affectionate warmth.

"Do you even have to ask?" she smiled against him.

"A dug-out grave awaits you both," the Gravemind growled, a collective voice coming from every Flood. "A fate you cannot dispel! Your destiny guides you deep, in the last circle of hell!"

"A Dante reference?" Cortana wondered aloud. _"His library is improvingâ€œ|"_

"SPARTAN-117!" the Arbiter called. "I have not been able to reestablish contact with Consus. We must assume that Cronus is still a threat."

"Understood," Cortana answered for him. "Hang on, I'll call the Elites and get them to launch an attack on the Ark. Mind if I use your voice, Arbiter?"

"My voice?" the Elite wondered. "It matters little. My forces will be unable to attack. The Office of Naval Intelligence has forbid my people from landing on your planet."

"Don't worry about ONI," Cortana assured him. "Ackerson's already under investigation. When section zero takes him out of power, I'm certain that a Human-Elite alliance shall surface swiftly."

"The exit is right this way," the Arbiter cut in, stabbing his blade in the direction of a branching-off corridor. "No, it's excellent news, Cortana. My people will be very pleased."

"Mmhm. Making the call now."

"We are almost out!" one of the Elites laughed in delight as they breached the Flood defenses at the opening to the corridor. His mirth was quickly stopped as a large tentacle snapped around the corner, smashing the Elite's skull in one solid blow.

"Fall back!" John called, backing away quickly into the previous chamber as the newest threat entered the fight.

It was large, perhaps 18 feet tall, with long tentacles for arms. Its lumpy, misshapen, hunched over form rested on two powerful, multijointed legs. It crouched low in front of the corridor entrance and flailed its whip-like tentacles across each other in a defensive, threatening display of power.

"It's a juggernaut!" Cortana marveled.

"Grenades," he ordered. They launched a barrage of grenades, both plasma and spiked, upon the creature to no apparent effect.

The juggernaut let out a low, gurgling shriek as it rushed them. They could only attempt to evade its crushing blows before it did them in. The lone Elite that stopped to slash at it found his neck broken before he could scream.

John ran backward, away from the creature, and fired into its mass. That seemed to be all they could do: keep firing on it and hope it would die before they ran out of ammo. Then the back-up Flood showed up, and it was all they could do to keep from dying.

One good thing came out of the newest wave, however. The combat forms carried small arms, weapons they could use against the juggernaut. It was a relatively simple feat to force the weapons from the hands of the Flood and turn them against the monstrous beast threatening them.

And finally the juggernaut did fall, its great bulk crashing down to the ground. By then, however, their numbers were drastically

decreased. Now only he and the Arbiter remained living, alongside the non-corporeal Cortana. He turned to face the Elite, "C'mon. Let's get the hell out of here."

They walked cautiously down the corridor, but encountered no more ambushes. Disturbingly, the Flood seemed to have halted its attack. _Not a good sign._

The reasons for this became obvious when they approached the exit door. Though it had recently been blasted open with plasma torpedoes, now the bared edges were mended. The door appeared at first glance to have been simply patched up with some bonding substance; however, a closer look revealed that the additional material appeared to have been formed with and made a part of the surrounding metal. As he studied it, he realized that it showed an almost organic complexity. It was as if the ship had healed itself, as though it were alive.

The Arbiter noticed it too. "Living metal? It cannot be."

"Hardly," Cortana muttered, her concentration focused elsewhere.

Dark laughter filled their ears, and Flood began to close in. "You try to run, but _I_ know: Any who enter must die. The walls close, they all restrict. Embrace your fate and not cry."

"We will fight to the last, parasite!" the Arbiter hissed.

"Away from the door!"

They jumped away as a flurry of green splashed through the cracks of the seemingly coagulated door. Thunder boomed and rattled as fuel rod after fuel rod impacted the metallic wound, widening cracks and weakening structural integrity.

"No!" the Gravemind roared as the door fell away to reveal a lone Grunt with a fuel rod cannon held on its shoulder, peering in from an awkward angle.

They wasted no time, rushing through the doorway while the Grunt covered their tracks. Outside (after reorienting themselves), they were greeted by the welcome sight of over forty Elite ships arranged around the valley. The Arbiter soon flagged down a Phantom, and they all were taken to safety while a series of Banshees kept the Flood at bay.

"The Elites are unable to gain entry to the Ark," Cortana reported. _"In theory, we could attempt to open whatever entryway Cronus may have passed through, but at this stage the Elites are opting to hold back and destroy the Ark through a series of bombardments from the safety of their ships."_

"It won't work," he spoke with certainty, though he was unsure quite how he knew such efforts were futile.

"Land the Phantom in the town of Voi, just along the edge of the cliff."

"Why?" the Arbiter asked in bafflement.

_"The Chief and I, w__e're getting out."_

The Arbiter looked at him for confirmation.

"Do it."

The Phantom turned around, and they were deposited within the ruins of Voi. The once industrious city had been reduced to shambles, only a few buildings still remaining intact. Here and there, dark puddles of crimson littered the ground with no sign of their owner in sight. "Why are we here?"

_"If this is the end, you should have a chance to see it. I'm told __it's__ spectacular to witness."_

"What are you talking about?"

Cortana laughed childishly. _"The end of the world, silly."_

"Cortanaâ€|"

"Go on," she encouraged. _"Let's have a look at the Ark."_

After a pause, he began to walk toward the valley. "Cortana, are youâ€| alright?"

"Penetrate the systemâ€| spread a virus, convert the systemâ€|"

"Cortana?"

"It saw me, John," she gasped, as though on the verge of tears. _"It was everywhere! Every matrix, every program, every fileâ€| It was flowing inside me and I couldn't stop it! Prorok, but Prorok! We guessed at the truth. We grasped at straws! We didn't know all the details, but __he__â€| Iâ€| weâ€| Prorok was the key. The Gravemind wanted Ascension, and it guessed at Prorok. It wanted the vessel, and I wanted the spirit it housed. I tricked it, made it think we were aligned so that it would let me inside itâ€|"_

He remained quiet through her monologue, letting her work out her distress on her own. Now however, when she faded into silence, he offered his support. "You won in the end. You got out. The Gravemind still doesn't own _Ascension_ without you to run it."

"Is this a win?" she sighed. _"Did we secure our victory or ubiquitous failure?"_

He had no answer to that and continued to stride purposefully toward the Ark. After a moment, Cortana announced that the Elites were beginning their bombing. Her words were soon punctuated by thunderous booms, and great flashes of light in the distance.

"Not even a scratch," she reported after they had ceased. _"We have to hope that Cronus never made it inside."_

He doubted very strongly that was the case, but said nothing. He

hopped down from the concrete wall on which he stood, and followed a road down toward the valley. Never before had he felt this way, certain he was to die, but with no mission left to complete. He tried to sort out his feelings, never before so complex. "I'mâ€¦ I'm glad we worked together."

"As am I," she replied. _"As a smart AI, I have the curse and blessing of being alive with a vast intellect but with a short lifespan. Knowing someone like you, John, makes that timeâ€¦ interesting."_

He decided to take that as a complement. He paused to grab an assault rifle lying in the dirt. Shaking the dirt from it, he turned from his path of the road to make a detour through the broken ring of what was once part of the tether of the New Mombasa space elevator. "Knowing you is also 'interesting.'"

She chuckled. _"But how limited your perception is of me! I have seen thingsâ€¦ Youâ€¦ I know you, your past, your futureâ€¦!"_

He turned his gaze from the Elite assault carrier flying nearly overhead, and faced the valley, spread open before him. He felt a strange feeling in the back of his mind, as though he had seen this beforeâ€¦ as if from an old dream. A Phantom escorted by Banshees flew over his head, heading towards the Ark, but then sharply turned for the assault carrier.

"Rising energy levelsâ€¦!"

Great clouds of dust streamed off the artifact as a shockwave sprang from its center. The cliff on which he stood shuddered, and he adjusted his footing as sections of rock fell from the top. However, his focus was on the artifact, where great plates surrounding the center had begun to rise. The center itself glowed with blue light, and a circle section in the very center descended into the Ark. He leaned in for a closer look as the light grew stronger, the plates rose higher, and the Elites scrambled away. A fountain of light exploded from within, leaping toward the sky _through_ the eye of the storm, and showering the area with light so bright his visor had to disengage to protect his vision.

"Thisâ€¦!" Cortana shuddered, _"â€¦Is the way the world ends."_

7-7-7-7

Cronus smiled with glee as he beheld the sight of the glorious Ark bonded with the satellite, as was displayed in the large hologram laid out before him. The path was almost within reach. He glanced down at the control panel, covered liberally with Human blood, and began to key in the sequence. It feltâ€¦ _wrong_, somehow, that the Prophet of Truth was not here to guide him. However, it was factual that the First had bound himself to _Ascension_, and was thus unable to leave.

He was knocked off his feet by a burst of gravity. Rising back up, he glared at the bloodwhore with fury. "Do you know what you're doing, pervert?" he spat, taking the _Blade of __Kesmek_ into his hands.

"More than you," the traitor replied, firing another burst.

He brought up the scythe and absorbed the shock. "I doubt that very much, freak." He fired a powerful stream of directed energy from the scythe, enough to incinerate the abomination. However, it brought up Tartarus' hammer and used its gravity manipulation to protect it from the blast. "Interesting."

The bloodwhore was the first to close the distance between them, striking out at him. He dodged the blow of the hammer and slashed downward, but was unprepared for the effect of the hammer sending out a shockwave as it struck the ground. He flew back, away from the bloodwhore, and fought to regain his footing as the traitor came for him.

"I have the gods on my side," he seethed, jumping to the side to avoid a blow while simultaneously slashing out with his scythe. "You cannot hope to succeed!"

"And yetâ€|" the bloodwhore spun around to block his attack, "We seem pretty evenly matched, wouldn't you say?"

"I would not!" He kicked out at the traitor's shin and struck out for its arms.

The bloodwhore absorbed the kick easily and knocked the scythe out of the way, launching a strong kick toward his stomachâ€| only to impact with his body shield.

"You see?" he laughed. "There is no point in fighting. Just surrender, let me kill you nice and quick, send you to that weak scum with which you bonded!"

"His nameâ€|" the traitor growled, striking hard and strong, catching the _Blade_ with the hammer head and forcing it from his grip. "â€|Is Aeson!" It slammed into him with the bulk of its body, sending him crashing into the wall.

"Urg," he grunted, thrusting out an elbow. The traitor caught his arm and twisted. He took advantage of that by spinning around behind the bloodwhore, and reached out to grab its neck. "This is how you die," he hissed. He barely registered the traitor's movement as it swung the hammer upwardsâ€|

WHAM!

He went down, sporting the world's greatest headache. _Bloody abomination,_ he thought, the last thought he would ever have. The traitor swung back aroundâ€|

24. Revolution

"W-what does that mean?" Miranda Keyes asked dumbly. She shifted her position as much as she could with her hands cuffed behind her back and two guards preventing her from rising from her chair.

Despite being dressed in the simple grey of a civilian adviser, the young ONI agent wore a high-level red badge indicating her as a Ms. Rani Sobeck. "It means," she stated, cold disdain running through her

voice, tinged with what sounded like a Southwestern United States accent, "That the review board has determined that you are a traitor to your government and to your species. It means that you have been sentenced to a lifetime of comatose in three days' time."

She could only gasp at this callous declaration of her own execution. "I had no choice!" she cried out, her voice rising well beyond the respectable levels of volume.

Sobeck shook her head. "You could have allowed the enemy to kill you, made your death mean something! Instead, you chose to threaten our whole existence."

This can't be happening! "The Elites can be our allies!" she insisted. "With their help, the war could be over in just a few months!"

"The Elites," Sobeck growled, "Eagerly led the attacks on Reach, on Coral, and countless other worlds. Trillions of human lives are gone because of the split-jawed slavers. If we willingly ally ourselves with them, do you think people would stand for it? While you've been off in space, the Covenant has assaulted our homeworld, leaving us to deal with the panic of billions in this bloody massacre. If we 'make nice,' guess how long it would take for the rebellion to start? Then how long would the war take?"

"No, no," she mumbled. "People wouldn't rebel! It's our compassion that makes us human! The people of Earth will recognize that the Elites were deceived by the Prophets, and they will be able to forgive them enough to make an alliance work."

"The Covenant has landed on seven continents, slaughtering every civilian. They are relentless. They hack their prisoners to pieces, rape them, force them to—" Sobeck trailed off, shuddering with revulsion. "—Our only morale has been built on hatred. We have nothing more to motivate our people than a rage for revenge. They will not stand for 'compassion.'"

"But—"

"In any case," Sobeck interrupted, "It is not my decision, and theirs is final." She glanced at her data pad. "You will be taken to a holding facility where you will wait out your time until the procedure. If you worship any deity, now would be the time to pray."

"No—" she moaned. "This isn't—I'm not a traitor! You can't do this! I am a servant of the United Nations! I have never—" she broke off as a neural-inhibitor collar snapped around her neck, cutting off any further action she may have wished to take.

Sobeck winced sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Commander. There's nothing I or Colonel Ackerson can do for you. That will be all," she told the guards.

7-7-7-7

Colonel James Ackerson smirked as he watched the holovid of Keyes being carried away, immobilized. About time she got what was coming to her. Very nice show, Rani."

"Thanks, boss," his assistant nodded, her well-composed face betraying a cringe as she watched the image of Keyes carried about like a doll. "Anyway, sir, GARDENER wants a confirmation on Operation: EXODUS as soon as possible" | "

Ah, yes, the Grunt revolution. Although its concept was quite unusual, there were a number of advantages to gaining this fifth column, not the least of which was securing defeat over the Covenant. In addition, an act of freeing slaves evoked the roots of the UEG's ideals and was highly good for morale. "I'll send him an answer in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir." She glanced briefly back at her data pad, what he knew to be a deceptive action to cover her rather exceptional memory. Perhaps she was afraid she wouldn't be able to get a husband if men knew how capable she was. In any case, after pretending to refresh her memory, she continued, "General O'Brien reports that all traces of _High Charity_ have been destroyed save for a bit of flotsam."

"A pity," he commented, even as he inwardly laughed at Harper's foolish outburst. "We could have gained a lot from the technology."

"Don't worry, sir," she assured him. "I'm sure the intel from the Monitor will be far more valuable."

He smiled as he remembered the acquisition of the Forerunner AI. Then it faded as the latest fuck-up came into his thoughts. "Tell me about the Ark."

"Sir. At 0322 MST today, shortly after the Covenant separatists violated our agreement, the Ark emitted a powerful beam of energy, which struck Luna and affixed itself to her surface, attaching the moon to the Ark. The Monitor indicates that this was a preparation for the activation of the Array. However, it would appear that the Elites halted the activation during their assault on the Forerunner dreadnought, sir," she recited with only the barest glance at her pad, which he was sure would currently tell her details no more relevant than the current time and temperature.

He sighed. _Far too close for comfort._ To say nothing of the potential global effects from Luna's halted revolution. "Can the Monitor deactivate the beam?"

"Only from within the Ark and with a human escort, sir."

He swore a long string of curses. _Should have ordered an attack the instant they breached Earth realspace_|_ But he began to reconsider as he thought about it. _No, this just lends credence to what must be done._ "Alright," he decided. "I'll green-light EXODUS." _The Lord is a man of war_|_

7-7-7-7

"Misriah Amory, Mare Erythraeum. I have to get there as soon as possible," Kader insisted forcefully.

The commercial pilot eyed the ONI tattoo visible on his arm, but shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr." | " she glanced at her chatter, which

read Kader's false persona, "â€|Davis, but there is nothing I can do. The UNSC has forbidden off-planet travel, and conditions as they are I wouldn't dare attempt it even without restrictions."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. This is an urgent matter of multinational security! I must reach Misriah as fast as possible, as _discreetly _as possibleâ€|" He lowered his voice, "I don't want to endanger you with certain information, so let me simply suggest that certain spooks in the higher workings may show some sympathies to the rebel forcesâ€|" Meyer would kill him for making that joke, though he suspected Mal would laugh. He wondered if either of them was still alive.

"â€|Be that as it mayâ€| Unless I get official authorization from the UNSC, my bird is planet-bound," the pilot refused. "Now, unless you have to be somewhere urgent under blue skies, I suggest you find another spaceport."

Sighing through gritted teeth, he thanked her and hurried off. Though he was pretty sure Oshiro had refrained from reporting his severe violation, it was only a matter of time before ONI would find out and track his Shark submersible to Hokkaido. The Covenant was focusing their attacks on continental landmasses and largely ignoring islands, making the industrial archipelago country an excellent site of wartime production. He figured his best bet from here was to grab a ride to Mars, where the URF presence was high. So, after taking a train to Tokyo with a constructed grid persona, he immediately began looking for a suitable spaceship.

He glanced back at the shuttle, a small commercial transport with _COBB Industries_ stamped on the side, and considered whether or not he should try to steal it. Ultimately, he decided against it. Any criminal activity would stand the chance of putting him on their radar. There was going to be enough fun getting past the Covenant without worrying about the UNSC blowing him out of the air.

No, he would have to do this legally. _Or at least rely on good old-fashioned sneakinessâ€|_ He paused in his step as the ground began to quiver underneath him. He turned around to see if any shuttles were launching, but instead witnessed people running for reinforced locations.

Earthquake, he realized. He knew this part of the landmass was host to a fault, known to spawn earthquakes from time to time. He started to make a run for the reinforced hanger threshold, but halted as the ground quieted.

"Not even in the 4.-range," muttered a nearby worker.

Kader nodded at him politely, and then continued. The earthquake, although fortunately harmless, had 'rattled' him a bit. _The world is a crazy place these daysâ€|_ The Covenant invasion, to say nothing of his espionage FUBAR, was enough to drive anyone over the deep end, and he mumbled a brief prayer under his breath.

Inexplicably, he began to recall myths that held an earthquake as a portent, heralding the end of the world. _Shut up, brain,_ he inwardly grumbled at himself. But still, perhaps there was something to it. For what better to bring about apocalypse than what was taking place?

7-7-7-7

He had saved the world.

Consus had to marvel, simply _marvel_ at what he had accomplished. "I, Consus, bloodmate of Aeson, bested Cronus and _saved the world_."

He grinned. _No point in bragging to myself._ After feasting on the former High Chieftain's brain and testicles (symbolically inheriting his intelligence and fertility, respectively), he donned the powerful armor and claimed the scythe as his own.

Clad in this masterful dress, he strode purposefully through the Ark, ruler of all its depths. Recognizing the glyph for outward transmissions on a wall that had the appearance of a seamlessly sealed doorway, he tapped the icon with the tip of the scythe. The Chieftain's tool functioned much as the _Fist of Rukt_ had, and the wall melted away into an opening through which he could step.

Inside was a room of beautiful silver. Highly reflective metallic panels surrounded an intensely dark, black bowl, into which he surmised he was to stand. Admiring his appearance in one of the mirror-like panels, he stepped down into the bowl.

He felt a twinge of nervousness as he stood on the unusual surface. The bowl was as black as the Shadow Sea, and seemed to absorb all light that shown upon it. Colorless, featureless, it reminded him of the tales of the Vrouw cult, an insane group of females said to possess hypnotic eyes that they would use to lead good males out into a secluded region to liquefy their entrailsâ€|

Ripping his gaze away from the blackness, he gasped as his face grew hot with increased blood flow. _Howâ€| long was I staring?_ he thought wildly. _This placeâ€|_

He looked up to a globe suspended above him, inscribed with a complex geometric pattern, and tapped it with the blunt of the scythe. The globe illuminated, holographic controls spilling out around him. He studied it carefully, identifying it as what he had suspected: a communications chamber.

There were so many glyphs, many of them unfamiliar to him, and he proceeded with care. "Hmm," he mused to himself. "On which channels shall I broadcast?" _Why notâ€| all of them?_ He made the necessary adjustments and, collecting himself, activated the transmission.

"Jiralhanae of the Covenant!" he cried, straightening proudly with a High Chieftain's weapon held in each hand. "Know that Cronus has been slain in honorable combat and I, Consus, have ascended to the noble rank of High Chieftain. The first bloodmate in history to do so," he added as an aside. "As leader of all Jiralhanae warriors, I declare war with the Sangheili officially _concluded_. The Covenant is friend to no Jiralhanae and shall be destroyed, their remnants crushed. Any who shall declare loyalty to the organization dedicated to our slaughter, shall be killed as a traitor. Separation is the only path for all true warriorsâ€|"

As he spoke, he felt Aeson's spirit fill his blood. Though he was dead, he spoke now in little whispers, encouraging Consus to take his place in the Jiralhanae hierarchy. _We have fulfilled our duty._

Consus crossed the scythe and hammer, creating a stance of power. "I have achieved ultimate power!" he roared his dominance to all Jiralhanae warriors. "Submit to my authority or die screaming!"

7-7-7-7

The Sangheili inside the _Enlightened Soul_'s control center were absolutely delighted when their Jiralhanae ally appeared above the controls, commanding separatism be adopted. Even Jitji breathed a sigh of relief. Though a Sangheili/Jiralhanae alliance made a formidable enemy, the Covenantâ€| was just horrifically destructive to everyone. Like the Forerunners were.

"If Consus has defeated Cronus, then the Ark has been halted," the Ship Master stated. "But we cannot relax just yet. The Flood remains a constant threat."

"The Flood is contained in _Ascension_," the Arbiter informed them. "A formation of Banshees keeps it from exiting the craft."

"_Ascension_ is not our only concern," 'Setfethee said. "High Charity has been destroyed from within, its shards descended to Earth. It is up to the _Humans_ to see to their destruction now."

"Do not worry," the Arbiter said. "Cortana assures me that the Office of Naval Intelligence shall soon recognize our good will and accept our assistance."

God forbid! Jitji shuddered. If the Humans would act alongside the Separatists, his revolution would be over before it began.

"I believe it is not vital to keep _Ascension_ intact," 'Setfethee mused. "If Cortana believes the Gravemind wants it for some greater purpose, it is my, hm, suspicion that we would not wish to see it operable. Therefore, I will recommend its destructionâ€|"

"_I'm afraid that's quite out of the question, really._"

Jitji turned his gaze back on the viewer. The image of Consus had vanished, replaced with one of a Human, male from the looks of it, the Monitor of Installation 04 floating beside him. _This is it._

He felt deep within him that this was the moment in which the future of his people would be decided. Either this Human would expose his plot, ensuring their continued bondage for a great many more cycles, orâ€| _Or they will have accepted us as allies._

The Arbiter bowed to the figures. "Colonel Aakersen, 343 Guilty Spark," he greeted. "I wish to apologize for my rather flagrant violation of our earlier agreement. However, I am certain you can recognize the urgency of the threat presented by the Prophet of Truth in light of the display produced from the Ark, and I trust that you will allow us to complete this task we have undertaken. Let us help

you defeat the Covenant and, most importantly, the Flood."

"_The Flood has been taken care of,"_ Aakersen said with a dismissive wave of his hand. _"Your mothership blew up, and the pieces were cascaded with atomic fire. There is very little chance even one spore could have survived. In light of that very small chance, we have Sharks prowling the waters and Shortswords guarding the skies. Believe me, the Flood is of little importance. What is of importance is your continued presence on Earth. I suggest you leave our atmosphere within the next ten minutes, or we will open fire."_

"The Flood are not contained in High Charity," the Arbiter stated calmly. "The Gravemind was instrumental in our defeat of the Prophet of Truth, and currently resides within _Ascension_'s walls. That is where our trouble lies, you see. If my fleet should concentrate laser fire upon the Forerunner vessel, there is evidence she will break."

"_The Gravemind's in Ascension,"_ Aackersen repeated with a sneer. _"Of course it is. Of course! Ascension is very important to me, understand? You will not destroy it! You can purge the Flood, Monitor?"_

"_With extended Sentinel support, I believe I can,"_ it reported. _"I may require Reclaimer support to maintain an advantage."_

"_Yes, leave the ship alone,"_ Aakersen returned to the Arbiter. _"My Sentinels can handle the Flood. If you wish to keep our relationship pleasant, you will leave Earth at once!"_

"Colonel Aakersen," the Arbiter bowed in a gesture of deep respect, "I beg of you to let us assist further in the matter of the Ark. Its threat casts a dark shadow on all living creatures. Truly, it is our duty as fellow members of life itself to see to its deactivation."

Aakersen considered the Arbiter's words. Finally, he relented. _"Very well,"_ the Human sneered. _"You may remain to assist in the Ark's deactivation. However, you will not fire upon Ascension, nor will you defy the authority of any of my men. Is that understood, alien?"_

"It is," the Arbiter agreed. "I thank you, and bid you happiness. The Ark shall not be touched by the Covenant, nor shall it be touched by Flood. We will ensure the beam vanish as if the day to the night, ensuring the safety of your worlds and ours."

"_You speak with exaggerated prose, Arbiter,"_ Aakersen noted with a chuckle. _"We'll see if that flowery speech of yours is backed by the Divine Providence to see you through to victory or if you fall flat on your split faces now, won't we?"_

Jitji's spirit surged with the Human's words. _Divine Providence!_ That was the hint, the message he needed. The Humans _were_ to assist him in his holy rebellion.

The Arbiter, however, was less approving of the response. "I suppose we shall, Colonel," he said, one of his mandibles visibly twitching with annoyance. "However, I believe you will be pleasantly surprised with our performance."

"_Unlikely,"_ Aakersen scoffed. _"You'll be getting a few UNSC vessels in your skies to make sure you stay on track. Fire on them, and I will save your skull for my own trophy."_

"Why would I fire on my allies?" the Arbiter asked in puzzlement, spreading his arms outward in a gesture of innocence.

Aakersen deigned no reply, instead terminating the transmission. The images of him and the Monitor vanished from the viewer.

The control center began to erupt in a flurry of discussion, but 'Setfethee held his hand up high to silence them. "Confirm transmission is no longer active," he snapped.

"Confirmed, Excellency," a Major reported after a moment's checking had passed.

"How in Prorok's name did they connect without my authorization?" 'Setfethee demanded of the room.

"It would appear that the Aakersen transmission rode in on the Consus beacon, Excellency," the same Major speculated. "We do not understand the method used by the Ark, and the very name of the Office of Naval Intelligence suggests the ability to accomplish great tasks such as these."

"When we send our people down into the Ark, let us begin our own investigation into the nature of the technology," the Arbiter suggested.

"Arbiter!" Jitji broke in. "Arbiter, with your permissionâ€¦ I would like to send my own Unggoy along with your Sangheili. I have been helping them train, and I am sure they will be very helpful to your warriors."

The Arbiter glanced at him. "Very well, Jitji," he smiled, before turning back to 'Setfethee. "I do not want to test our truce, but perhaps it would be wise to move our ships into position to fire upon _Ascension_."

"Perhapsâ€¦" 'Setfethee considered.

With a short bow, Jitji exited the control center and made his way toward his own warriors. This was excellent, all the pieces falling together. Doubtlessly, this was proof of a divine presence.

His mind passed over his borrowed memories, the tools God had given him to succeed. He winced as he remembered the horrors the Arbiter had forced upon himâ€¦ upon Zagneit Nokisto. Another Arbiter, that is.

What does it matter, anyway? They all might as well be the same person. After all, it was the same institution delivering the same crimes upon the same people. It did not truly matter that the Wajoli Arbiter was different from the one he knew, nor did it matter that Jitji was not his ancestor. The battle remained the same, even after all these years.

My people were once free, now they are not. The Sangheili had seen

to that. _We were once great, but we have fallenâ€|_

No more. He clenched his fists so tightly they ached. _We'll shake it off and rise once again. With God on our side, we cannot lose._

7-7-7-7

Consus stood as impressively as he could muster as he maintained the Ark's main opening by holding the scythe through its length, allowing the numerous Sangheili to enter. Not quite the job he imagined worthy of a High Chieftain, but the facts remained that much of the Ark was still inoperable. He supposed it was good, then, that there were scientists here to study it.

Why couldn't Jiralhanae scientists have come? he lamented as Unggoy carried equipment inside. He wondered briefly why the Unggoy were carrying so many pieces of long-range weaponry, but didn't focus on it. For all he knew at the time, it was an insignificant detail.

Finally, the Arbiter stepped through and Consus let the hole close, vanishing the reflected glare of the Ark's energy. "Arbiter," he greeted the Sangheili, nodding his head respectfully.

"High Chieftain," the Arbiter nodded in return. The Sangheili looked him over briefly, and then got down to business. "The Humans have beenâ€| This _Aakersen_ has been most belligerent. It is probable we are to be let here only a small time, during which I hope to collect as much information on the Ark as we are able to do so. The beam, do you know how to deactivate it?"

"That which binds Earth to her satellite?" he queried. "I believe I do. The main control panel appears to be based on the standard Abiri sequence. Cronus' hand motions are marked with the blood he poured upon it. To deactivate it, I would run my hands in the opposite sequence." It was very simple. Anyone who had gazed upon it as he had would doubtlessly come to the same conclusion.

"Indeed? That is an interesting hypothesis," the Arbiter noted. Lowering his voice, he added, "It is also probable that the Humans should force us to leave the instant their satellite is freed. In the interest of science, I should ask you to consider your hypothesis with great care before putting it to the test."

He smirked. "Very well, Arbiter. I suppose there may have been something I overlookedâ€|"

"Then we are in agreement." The Arbiter smiled a Sangheili smile, his mandibles lightly spread apart. "Hypotheses should be considered for a good length of time, I would think. The Humans may become impatient, however, so it would be best to keep such a length minimal so as not to upset our hostsâ€|"

"So, long enough to study, but not too long Aakersen decides to cut off our arms?" he confirmed.

The Arbiter nodded, his mandibles spreading wider in a greater smile. Then the smile died. "The Covenant has been cut off at the head, their leader destroyed. However, the Flood have taken _Ascension_,

and Aakersen has forbidden me to fire on it. I need you to lead your warriors. Should I fall or be chased away from this planet, I need you to ensure the Flood do not escape."

"I'm sure I did not hear you order a Jiralhanae High Chieftain," he said dryly. "Because no Sangheili would be foolish enough to believe he holds power over the Jiralhanae race."

"Consus!" The Arbiter sighed. "This is no time for power games between you and me. I am sorry you have sufferedâ€| but there will be times better than this one to assert your authority. Please trust me, comrade. Do as I say. For all our sakes."

He narrowed his eyes at the Sangheili's rather personal turn of phrase. "I suppose you're not _so_ bad," he considered. "Very well. Aakersen kills you, I destroy _Ascension_."

The Arbiter bowed his head gratefully. "Remain here and consider your hypothesis," he spoke again. "I should return to the control center."

He nodded, and tapped the symbol to open the entrance. The wall shifted, a hole expanding out of nothingness like a respiratory orifice of some titanic living creature taking in a great breath. _Are we its meal or its parasites?_ Either way, the imagery was very disturbing.

"Jitji!" the Arbiter called for his pet Unggoy.

It hurried over obediently, another one trailing behind. "Yes, Arbiter," the Unggoy chirped. It turned to its fellow and muttered, "Maintain discipline, Gedeg."

"Farewell, Jitji," the Unggoy called Gedeg murmured, casting Jitji a look of such loving adoration Consus had to smile to himself.

Ah, the naivetyâ€| He rolled his eyes. _Stupid Unggoy._

The Arbiter bowed once more, and then left. His Unggoy followed.

Sealing the hole behind them, Consus glanced at the remaining Unggoy and gave a sharp growl to get it moving.

Gedeg, however, remained where he stood. The Unggoy simply cocked his head to study Consus with a haughty look of superiority.

"Don't you have duties?" he growled.

Gedeg nodded slowly. "Much to doâ€|" The Unggoy hurried off, noticeably keeping to two legs.

He shook his head. The Unggoy were certainly behavingâ€| oddly. _Or maybe it's just the Ark._

He was having the strangest tension in this place. He knew that there was really nothing wrong, that it was probably all in his headâ€| _But!_

But he couldn't help but feel anxious in this dim, shiny chamber. It

was if a strange buzzing were occurring in the back of his head without any actual sound. Or it was as if his vision was becoming fuzzyâ€| only it wasn't. He truly sensed _nothing_â€|

He sighed. It mattered little. He just needed to wait until the Sangheili could record whatever they could before he freed the satellite and could be himself free of the Ark.

Strolling through the rows of Sangheili, all studying the many facets of the room, he took it upon himself to start chanting a wordless hymn to help aid the scientists in their work. "Ohhhhh," he sang his love for the Forerunner might. "Ohhh. Ohhhh. Ohhh. Ohâ€|"

A Sangheili Major smiled, and joined in. "Ohhh, ohhâ€|"

Soon all among them were united in harmony. It was a marvelous moment in which he could finally relax and feel at peace. Though the Covenant was doomed, Sangheili and Jiralhanae did not need to be enemies. _In fact, this could be the dawn of a wondrous new era of friendshipâ€|_

It came as a shock, then, when the Major was all of a sudden brained before his eyes. The first indication of the aberration came with a metallic sound that met his ears. The flash of a particle beam had pierced the Sangheili's body shield, helmet, skull, and brain.

The body slumped down.

He vaguely registered the song abruptly come to a halt. Now, as if a new rhythm sung by a violent foe, more shots rang out in close succession. The Majors were the first dead, the Minors but secondary targets.

Unable to fight with two weapons that each required two hands to operate, he dropped the scythe and brought the hammer full into his grip. Engaging the enhanced body shield, he backed speedily away from the slaughter that took place. The Sangheili were doomed, their movements disorderly and scared.

When the last Sangheili corpse impacted the ground, he halted his backward retreat. Aiming the _Fist of Rukt_ in the general direction of the enemy, he waited. After a short pause, one which felt considerably longer to his tense mind, they appeared.

Unggoy.

The killers were all Unggoy. They emerged in tiered groups: plasma pistol wielders in front, fuel rod gun wielders in back. He was sure that one Unggoy, Gedeg, led the attack from somewhere off in the shadows behind them.

"Prorok's blood," he swore. _Aeson, you were rightâ€|_ He had been a fool to underestimate them.

Now he stood, the last of the Arbiter's warriorsâ€| He laughed to himself as he realized he counted himself as one of the Arbiter's. Still, the Arbiter knew not what had occurred. He had to warn him.

He considered making an attempt to strike down the Unggoy rabble, but

decided against it. If the shield could be broken by the blow of the _Fist of Rukt_, it could very well yield to the blast of a fuel rod. He would not simply allow these Unggoy to take over the Ark.

Turning, he made a dash for the radio room. Though he ran swiftly, he was aware of Unggoy giving chase. As he reached the doorway, he spun around and slammed the hammer onto the ground. The gravity shock sent his pursuers tumbling, giving him time to enter.

Closing the door behind him, he practically leaped into the bowl. For one panicked moment, he was sure he had jumped into an abyss, but was calmed as his feet impacted the solid surface. Bringing up the controls, he sent out a quick transmission on all channels.

"The Unggoy have turned on us," he warned the world outside.
"Treacherous vermin!"

His words were given punctuation as he heard the harsh thump of a fuel rod impact. The Unggoy were trying to break their way insideâ€|

"The Sangheili party has been slaughtered," he continued. "None survive. However, I do have a, ahem, hypothesis regarding the deactivation of the Ark: reverse Abiri sequenceâ€|"

A loud rumble began to emanate from the closed door. The lit glyphs on its face dimmed as the rumbling continuedâ€|

"Listen, I believe this to be the work of the Arbiter's pet Unggoy. This may not be the only incident. The Unggoy may be revoltingâ€|"

The door's color was steadily brightening from its dull bluish silver to a glowing red, as though the metal were rapidly being superheated. A circle of white grew in its center, orange radiating outward from it.

"Be on your guard," he warned, terminating the transmission and hurrying away from the door.

The metal shattered as a colossal beam of directed energy erupted, slamming into the far wall. He felt his skin become moist with sweat as the room temperature raised significantly. Aiming at the opening, he waited.

The beam died. Soon, Unggoy armed with fuel rod cannons crept from the opening like the verminous creatures they were. He fired.

The burst threw them backwards, and he ran for the opening. Before the Unggoy could recover, he slammed the hammer to the ground. The shock split their tanks apart, and likely shattered their bones.

Enthused by his success, he turned and ran through the opening. His vision instantly became alight with the glow of another directed energy beam, and forced his leg muscles to shove him up high in the air. In the split second he hovered above, he saw the attackers: six Unggoy, all together bearing the weight of the battle scythe.

He fired even as he beat against the scythe. The resulting shock wave scattered the Unggoy across the corridor. Their bodies crumpled as methane detonated in minor explosions.

There was only a moment to celebrate his victory, for a fuel rod at once crashed into him. Though he stumbled, the powerful energy shield of the High Chieftain did its job well, leaving him whole. As the green fire drained away, he saw the mass of Unggoy coming for him.

Suddenly, he found their always great numbers disturbing. If there was another rebellion, thenâ€¦ _There are quite possibly more enemies than there are weapons to arm them._ They probably could not do that much damage, but now was _not_ the time to fight a new war.

We don't need the added weakness, he thought as he fired. His blast flattened many of the charging Unggoy, and he let out a barking laugh. "Do you truly think you can stand victorious? Surrender yourselves now, and I will ensure your deaths be painless and without suffering."

The Unggoy paid him no heed, and just kept charging forward blindly. The similarity to the Flood did not escape him, and he frowned. "You cannot hope to succeed," he called again. "Do your families a favor and surrender to your strongerâ€¦"

A flash of a particle beam struck his shield, sending electrical arcs around him and causing him to shudder in unexpected pain. "Whatâ€¦?" he gasped, amazed that a particle beam should cause that manner of pain when even a fuel rod would not.

Another flash, and the _Fist of Rukt_ fell from his grip. Dimly aware that his shield had failed, Consus looked up at his killers in shock. _Is this how it ends?_

Aeson, my belovedâ€¦!

7-7-7-7

"_The Sangheili party has been slaughtered!_"_

Ship Master Lyla 'Roholee lowered his mandibles in a skeptical frown. "Unggoy Rebellion," he muttered. "This Jiralhanae would have us believe another to be taking place? Laughable."

On cue, his warriors began laughing. _So eager to please they make fools of themselves,_ he thought disparagingly. Although, as the Jiralhanae continued, he had to smile himself.

"Would you slaughter Sangheili?" Major 'Nekalee, his tactical adviser, mocked a nearby Unggoy worker as it cleaned a console.

The Unggoy quickly shook its head in a denial and then scampered away, causing the control center to break into true laughter.

"Besides the Unggoy," he laughed, waving the foolishness aside, "What is to be gained from this information detailing deactivation of the Ark? Presumably the Jiralhanae wishes us to go there to perform the deed ourselvesâ€¦ Could this Unggoyâ€¦ thingâ€¦ be a trick to lure us

into a trap?"

"It is a definite possibility," 'Nekalee agreed. "If you recall, I was skeptical of this notion of alliance from the very start. It does not stand as an implausibility for me to believe that this Jiralhanae High Chieftain were to set a trap even in the heart of the Ark itself."

"Indeedâ€|" he sighed. "I should like send a query to _Enlightened Soul_ at once. Major 'Ylfaree, if you please?"

"Yes, Excellency," 'Ylfaree nodded. "Openingâ€" Arrrraaalllgh!" An explosion of luminous green fire erupting from a fuel rod ended his life mid-sentence.

He spun around, as did the remainder of his control crew, and opened fire on the enemies as they poured from the doorways: Unggoy. Dozens of Unggoy now charged them, firing a slew of plasma at his crew and him. Though their plasma rifles were powerful and directed, the sheer mass of plasma dumped out of overcharged plasma pistols made quick work of Sangheili shields.

What manner of trickery is this? was his final thought.

7-7-7-7

Almost immediately after the Arbiter arrived back aboard, a Minor arrived to tell him that he was summoned to the control center. This in and of itself was not an unusual event. What struck him as unusual was that 'Setfethee had insisted he bring Jitji with him.

He cast the Unggoy a curious look.

Jitji looked back silently, refusing to divulge any knowledge he may have possessed regarding the summoning.

"We shall be there shortly," he told the aide. He began striding toward the control center. "Come, Jitji."

Jitji followed without a word.

When they entered the control room, he was surprised by the actions of a Sangheili Major, who leveled a plasma rifle at the Arbiter's Unggoy servant, only to be waved off by 'Setfethee. "Whatâ€| has occurred?"

"When you left Consus, what was his temperament?" 'Setfethee asked instead, avoiding his question.

"He wasâ€| agreeable," he supposed. "Filled with happiness at his achievement, as well as his usual cockinessâ€| What is this about?" He glanced at Jitji, who remained calm throughout what he would think to be a tense moment for the Unggoy.

"The Jiralâ€" the Major began to exclaim in anger, only to be silenced by his Ship Master.

"Consus sent out another transmission," 'Setfethee explained. "Perhaps it is best you simply view its contentâ€|" He activated the

recording.

The Arbiter stared at the hologram as it played out his ally's final warning, the Jiralhanae's face tense with fear. "Unggoy revolt?" He looked to Jitji for answers. "Is this true?"

Jitji took in a deep breath before responding. "It is," he answered simply.

"What?" It took several seconds before the Arbiter could process what had been said. When he did, he drew his sword with a fiery anger. "Is this how you repay a debt of mercy?!"

"You are a fool!" The Unggoy began to laugh hysterically, stammering in a high-pitched voice, "You are a servant of _evil_, Arbiter! What I do now is nothing less than the fulfillment of free will, morality of the one truly divine."

Jitji then laid his hands on his air mask and ripped it from his face. "I would rather die free," he gasped on air that was deadly poison to him, "Than I would live in bondage!" He collapsed to the ground, jerking in spasms as he asphyxiated.

The Arbiter stared at the Unggoy as he died. When Jitji at last twitched only from reflex and not willful intent, he sighed aloud at this tragedy he had allowed to transpire from his simple act of mercy. "Perhaps the Prophets were wise to keep them bound to their Milk!"

'Setfethee stepped over and kicked at the corpse. "Have that taken to the food supply," he muttered to a Minor, who hurried to obey. "It matters little now," he spoke to the Arbiter. "At least let us take consolation in knowing that Jitji's rebellion is small and contained. The original Unggoy Rebellion was far worse, making up all of the High Charity Unggoy. Jitji had, say, a fraction of a unit to plan a revolt using only the combined Unggoy strength of the _Enlightened Soul_? It is a mess we can clean up swiftly."

"Consus was greatly distressed," he disagreed. "He would not use lightly a term such as 'slaughter.' No, the Unggoy attack must have been great indeed to arouse such fear."

"You gave it the rank of Sergeant," 'Setfethee reminded him. "Unggoy are such communal creatures regardless. Their groups characteristically speak with one mind, one voice!" The _Prophets_ once directed their voices with the indoctrination they visited upon us all. It is rapidly becoming apparent to me that we lack clear understanding of the social structures in place, nor have we sought to replace them with any form of elegance!"

"We must regain control as swiftly as possible," he decided, growling at Jitji's betrayal. "Send a team to the Ark. Send everyone we can spare! Request additional support from our allied vessels. Once we reach the Ark, kill every Unggoy on sight. No sense in allowing this social disease to continue to spread."

"Agreed," 'Setfethee nodded. "I would also wish performed a sweep of the _Enlightened Soul_ to cleanse our ship of hostile Unggoy," this he directed at his easily provoked Major, who eagerly moved to lead such a sweep.

The Arbiter glanced down at where Jitji's discarded gasmask lay upon the ground, forgotten by the Minor. He knelt down to retrieve it, and held the object in his hand. He turned it over and over, studying its various facets.

He had felt such pride! Jitji had been an experiment, he knew that. However, what satisfaction he had felt from believing he had created an era of unity across boundaries of species now drained away from him, leaving him cold and empty. It was not just the Unggoy, but the Humans, and the Jiralhanae. Four species he had hoped to align now receded far away. And the Flood!

He shook his head. Thrusting the mask into the hands of another Minor, he strode up the ramp to set his gaze on the viewer. Forty-two separatist ships hovered around the edges of the Ark, its energy beam as powerful as it ever was, while the faint outlines of Human ships were visible on the periphery, encircling their formation. Then, as he watched, a separatist ship began to deploy plasma torpedoes bound for Ascension.

"What in hell!" He flipped his fingers across the controls, quickly opening communications with the ship, labeled as the Agonized Devotion. "Agonized Devotion, terminate your attack at once!"

An angered Ship Master appeared above the viewer. "Arbiter," the Zealot shook his head in frustration, "You do not understand! The Unggoy will hell!"

The hologram vanished as light leaped from the viewer. Another ship, the Blessed Oblation, had engaged its engines to a degree not usually seen in atmosphere and crashed headlong into Agonized Devotion's rear. The resulting explosion destroyed both ships, and threw their remains across the viewer's span.

"Merciful gods hell!" 'Setfethee murmured as he stared alongside the Arbiter.

"No," he shook his head. "Nothing of the sort."

As they watched, plasma torpedoes began to be launched from the array of ships, not at Ascension but each other. Hysteria was dominating their fleet. He opened communications with all nearby ships, and began broadcasting at once a message of peace, "Do not let fear take you! The Unggoy situation is under control! I want all ships to cease fire and hell!"

His message was cut off by another broadcast from the Ark. Consus, however, was gone. In his place stood an Unggoy, smeared with the dark blue blood of a Jiralhanae. "Arise, my brothers!" the Unggoy shouted, pumping a fist in the air defiantly. "Cast down the Sangheili!"

7-7-7-7

"Alright," Ackerson smirked to Rani as they watched the footage of one of Jitji's lieutenants. "That's our cue."

He tapped a key to bring Fleet Admiral Harper up on the screen. "Help the separatists clean up the remaining Covenant," he ordered. "And

then blow them out of the sky."

"_Yes, sir,"_ Harper agreed. "_With pleasure."_

"Excellent," he smiled, closing the channel. He brought up the tactical display, depicting the locations of the ships, stations, and heavenly bodies in relation to Earth. The Covenant ships were now heavily diminishing as they were attacked by both UNSC and separatist craft.

Rani got up and walked quickly toward him, slipping a pen out of her pocket. "Are you sure that was wise, sir?"

"Of course it was," he smiled at her reassuringly. "Make no mistake, sweetie, Earth will last through this. She will stand triumphant while the aliens will fall. And with _Ascension_? Well, I don't want to make outrageous promises, butâ€"

"Sir!" Hanno, an AI appearing in the form of a Yeti, projected its form in a nearby holotank.

"Damn it, Hanno," he growled. "I wasn't going to disclose anything confidential!"

"It's not that, sir," the Yeti shook its head. "ONI has confirmed via Slipspace monitoring that either a large object or a formation of ships is fast approaching Earth. Its exact nature is as of yet unknown, but it is likely to reach Earth within the next ten minutes."

"Sir," Rani repeated haltingly, playing with her pen in what he took to be a nervous habit, "Are you sure it is wise to lose an ally?"

7-7-7-7

"â€|_The Grunts may be revolting..."_

Ensign Michael Daniels smiled at the Brute as it screamed its warning, automatically translated by the computer. "Yes, B.K.," he chuckled, "The Grunts _are_ revolting. Plus, they're rebelling!"

Ensign Pesce snorted. "Turn that off. We have more important things to worry about."

He switched off the holotank. Swiveling his chair around, he took a peek outside the window. Shark Team Zeta was approaching one of the fragments of High Charity, what looked like a sliver of an apartment building. Squinting, he was sure he saw what looked like decayed growth. "Oh, yeah," he nodded, crossing himself. "Definitely Flood."

"Tiamat thinks so too," Pesce agreed, referring to their team's AI. His hands followed the same ritualistic pattern, combined with a hushed prayer. "Fortunately, nothing's showing up on the scanner. Nukes killed it."

"Thank God," he murmured.

The Sharks moved into formation around the fragment. At the go-ahead of Petty Officer Second Class Elizabeth Murphy, they began coating the fragment with oxidized napalm. The liquid adhered to the alien metal, its intense heat burning away every remnant of the hostile parasite.

"Take that, you sons of bitches," Pesce muttered.

He was inclined to agree, though he refrained from speaking. The briefing in which the Flood was revealed had to be the scariest one yet. An ancient alien lifeform so hostile it could consume all sentient beings? It was the very substance of nightmares. _Who needs to make up stories about witches to get children to behave with creatures like the Flood in the world?_

It was perhaps his feelings of paranoia that drew his gaze to the motion tracker. "Hey! Hey, we've got multiple contacts on the periphery!"

"What?" Pesce looked at the display, and then reported the find to the Petty Officer.

"_Don't worry about it,"_ Murphy reassured them. _"Tiamat has identified them as ambient wildlife, our own counterparts: wild sharks. Blue sharks to be exact. They're Endangered, so don't shoot at them, understand? It's fine. Proceed to next target."_

"Blue sharks," he repeated as the Shark formation set off for the next drifting piece of High Charity. "Are those deadly?"

Pesce shrugged. "Not sure. Don't think so."

"_Heads up, all! Life detected on section of debris. Tiamat believes it to be activeâ€¦_"_

"Roger thatâ€¦" Pesce swallowed. "Daniels, the first sign of movement, blow it the hell away. I don't care if it's Endangered or not."

"Don't have to tell me that," he nodded. He slipped his hands into the controls used to operate the firing system, and brought the interface up to his HUD. He ran a quick ammunition check. _Okay, all six torpedoes, 1200 .50 caliber rounds, 853 gallons of EIFâ€¦_ We're good to go._

As they approached the next piece of debris, he could see the lifeform_s_ active against the metal. Unlike the 'apartment' of the previous debris, this piece was a smoothly curved nook. Resting in the center, squirmed a mass of living creatures.

Firing torpedoes would be too messy at this stage of the game. Likely to scatter the targets and make it difficult to kill each one. No, the best bet was to move in closer and then cook the lot.

So, they moved closer.

It was Ensign Sclesier who first figured it out. _"Hey, it's Hunters!"_ she called over the radio.

And it was. Hunters without armor, just huddled against the wall in a

squirming swarm.

"_Lekgolo eels, the base part of Covenant Hunters,"_ Tiamat confirmed. _"No need for alarm. Their physiology renders them immune to Flood infestation."_

"_You heard the lady,"_ Murphy said. _"Save your ammo for the Flood."_

Shouts of outrage emerged from the more defiant members of Zeta. Michael was in agreement with their sentiment, though he didn't dare voice it on an open channel. Even with the threat of the Flood out there, the thought of letting a group of Covies go made him sick to his stomach.

"_That's enough!"_ Murphy snapped. _"Forget the Hunter swarm! We will proceed to the next target now."_

Pesce activated the radio. "Yes, sir, Petty Officer! And may I add, the Hunters won't be getting out of this alive. What do you think attracted the sharks in the first place?"

A chorus of whoops met his statement. Michael himself certainly felt better about the situation. "That's right," he laughed. "Mother Earth 1, Covies zip."

"_That's enough, fish,"_ Murphy snapped again, although she sounded in a better mood than last time. _"Move to the coordinates Tiamat sent."_

So, the UNSC Sharks abandoned the Hunters, leaving them to the mercy of the blue sharks. While they were in transit, he flipped the holotank back on. The Brute had gone, and the generic ONI propaganda was playing. "Hey, what do you think about this 'Free the Grunts' shit they're pumping out?"

Pesce shrugged. "Seemsâ€¦ weird."

"Yeah, what the hell, ONI?" He rapped his knuckle against the tank, as if Minister Dunn would hear and answer him instead of repeating the same rhetoric. "You expect us to feel compassion for those pigs?"

"The Covies at Earth, maybe we need this," Pesce suggested. "Our resources _were _stretched as it was with the Mars trouble, now thisâ€¦ The moon herself snared. The Floodâ€¦ Maybe we need thisâ€¦"

"Need what?" he scoffed. "A deal with the devil? Are you forgetting about the Draco III massacre? I don't care if the Elites _are_ slavers. The Grunts don't have a shiny clean record themselves. Murderous pigs."

"Look around, Daniels," the other seaman sighed. "Reach has fallen. The Covies are at Earth. The Brutes, ah the _Brutes_, have pillaged us. The Elites at least have their pseudo sense of honor. The Brutes have none whatsoever. You know the survivors' stories as well as me. The Gruntsâ€¦ are grunts. Their massacre is nothing compared to Sydney, to Washington, or to Pyongyang."

"I don't think you can compare massacres," he objected. "The end result is the same: death. The Grunts killed millions of colonists, a blood count far higher than the citizens of individual cities."

"Let's get this straight," Pesce snapped, letting emotion into his voice. "We're at war. We've killed our share of Grunts, but that doesn't make us murderers."

"No, the Covenant started the war," he shook his head. "They're the bastards thatâ€"

"The Prophets started the war," Pesce interrupted him. "They're the politicians, the ones in charge. The Brutes and Elites are the generals, and the Grunts are the footsoldiers. If they were enslaved like Dunn said, then they had no choice but to kill us. And for the record, the crimes against humanity the Brutes have committed are pure, unfounded acts of torture. The Brutes are a race of sadists, damned before they were walkingâ€|"

"I simply don't understand this apologist attitude," he broke in. "How can you even consider forgiving the Grunts for what they did?"

"I'm not," Pesce denied. "The war has been brutalâ€| There's no forgiveness to be found except from the heavens. Butâ€| Open your eyes, damn you! We're losing the war! We have to make that devil's pact! To protect our families! The Grunts are a far better ally than the Drones, Jackals, Elites, or Brutesâ€|"

"A devil's pact is never a good thing," he asserted. "There's always a price to be paid. We ought not to be making friends with any Covie, even the slaves."

Pesce said nothing more in response, and the Shark's cabin fell into silence penetrated only by Dunn's energetic preaching.

25. Crises

"Five minutes until Slipspace breach," Hanno reported calmly but urgently, his glowing red eyes staring unblinkingly at Ackerson.

He shook his head. "Operation: EXODUS is already underway. You might as well try to stop a tidal wave. Even if we get Jitji to make an official announcementâ€| We might as well ride it as much as we can."

As he spoke, two of the tactical display's indicators of Covenant ships winked off. The Grunts did their job well. As much as he hated to admit it, the Grunt revolution might well be the key to winning the war. "They're fast, they're deadly, and there's so manyâ€|"

"Sir?" Hanno shot him a look of confusion. "Scans for animate Flood in the Pacific region have come back negative. The Monitor assures us that our purging methods will be effective, though it wants to take its own Sentinels to scour the wreck to be sureâ€|"

"I didn't mean the Flood," he cut in. "Though now that you mention

it, I'm making _Ascension_ our priority. With the help of the Grunts, we can secure the Ark. I would have hoped to wait until the Elites could be eliminated, but with the Flood in _Ascension_ we had best act as fast as humanly possible."

"We can presume the Gravemind wants _Ascension_ for the same reason we do," the AI remarked bitterly. "However, I am not certain our ex-Covenant friends are aware of its capabilities."

"If they did, we'd never have a chance," he said between gritted teeth. "Exactly why we're not telling them."

"Four minutes," Hanno reported. "If the new arrivals hold loyalty to the Covenant, it is uncertain how this will affect the battle. It remains a possibility that the separatists could convert the new arrivals to their cause and affectively overpower us. However, if our Grunts were to convert their Gruntsâ€"

"Is there a point to this speculation?" he interrupted. "Do you have an effective course of action cooked up to deal with whatever could happen?"

"Yes, sir," the Yeti nodded. "But only assuming that the approaching contact is, in fact, a Covenant fleet. Additionally, the odds will be more heavily in our favor if their crews include a large number of Grunts and a low number of Brutes. Footage indicates the Brutes are far more capable of dealing with the Grunt revolution than the Elites, perhaps due to the Elites' dependence on their personal energy shields. The Brutes, most of which make do without shields, would have no such weakness."

"Alright," he sighed, cracking his knuckles. "Suppose it _isn't_ Covenant. Suppose that when those Brutes fought in the Ark, they instigated somethingâ€| Forerunner?"

Hanno fell silent for several seconds, an unusual feat for an AI. Finally, he spoke, "Three minutes. I couldn't tell you, sir. The Monitor says it doesn't know, but wants to examine the Ark. Sir, if it is Forerunner, we have to consider the possibility of another Flood threat."

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it," he sighed. "How long is it now?"

"Sir. Two minutes and forty-six seconds."

He nodded slightly, glancing over at his assistant. Rani continued to stand idly nearby, her gaze stuck on the board, while she rhythmically struck her leg with her pen. "Don't you have something to do?"

"Ohâ€|" Rani shrugged nervously. "Sirâ€| If it's not a problem, I'd like to stay here a moment and seeâ€| how bad it is?"

His eyes narrowed, but he gave her a short nod. "I don't see what harm two minutes and forty-six seconds can do."

"Two minutes and thirty-two seconds. Sir, Earth wildlife has begun exhibiting chaotic behavior as an apparent result of the halted lunar cycle. There have been multiple reports of protected marine life,

specifically humpback whales, attacking UNSC submersibles unprovoked."

"Some damage is to be expected," he nodded. "Make it known to the council I advise that our men shoot any whale on sight. I've never been a fan of treehugger policies, anyway."

"Yes, sir." The AI paused. "The Navy is fairly alarmed by the â€" two minutes â€" by the attacks, and has already overridden the wishes of the Department of Environment Protection in this matter."

"Good, goodâ€|" He looked again at the display, where UNSC forces were gaining a significant advantage. _Those bloody Grunts actually pulled it offâ€|_ "Confirm all Harper's men have been informed of the coming fleet."

"Sir. All vessels were informed within one minute of discovery. It's in God's hands now, sir."

He let out a rough sound halfway between a sigh and a laugh. "When AIs start depending on faith," he remarked to Rani, "That is when you should be worried."

"Sir, I was not implying anything of the sort," the AI huffed, sounding offended. "I was simply employing a popular colloquialism to convey a specific sentiment, that of helplessness until more information can be obtained."

"Whatever, whatever," he waved his hand in dismissal. In truth, he really didn't care that much. Certainly not enough to bother arguing the point.

"Sir," the AI suddenly spoke up in alarm. "I picked up a rumor that Section Zero may have us _all_ under investigation. SPARTAN-117 is suspected to have been led to his death through traitorous action from someone in Section Three. Sir, one minute until Slipspace breach."

"Zeroâ€|" Rani muttered under her breath.

"Internal affairs," he explained quickly for her benefit. Section Zero itself was strictly need-to-know and he didn't expect her to need to know, but didn't care enough at the moment. There were bigger things to worry about. "Hanno, this _is_ bad news for all of us. I'm sure you'll make the necessary alterations to help keep us in the clear and allow Zero to catch the real traitors, yes?"

"Yes, sir. Deletion has already begun for all non-essential files, and I'm developing advanced encryption techniques for all files considered essential."

"Sir," Rani broke in, "Hanno is a _dumb_ AI, right? Couldn't a smart AI, especially one built for spying, be better than him?"

"Rani, that's very unlikely," he waved her off dismissively. "All the smart AIs are currently employed in combat. Even Zero wouldn't use one here."

"Colonel Ackerson is correct," Hanno agreed. "All registered smart AIs serve as shipboard AIs; we can't afford to not do so in our

present circumstances."

"If you say so, sir," she nodded, appropriately backing out of the conversation.

"Sir! Contacts inbound: fifteen seconds. Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, twoâ€¦ Sir, Slipspace breach!"

The tactical display exploded with a cascade of new ships, all of which settled just outside of orbit. However, the ships were not the Covenant he had expected. Nor were they some strange Forerunner variety. Instead, the ship indicators were all very familiar, very human.

"Initial scans indicate eighty-three ships total," Hanno reported. "Eighteen _Mako_-class corvettes, thirty _Mandala_-class frigates, twenty _Marathon_-class cruisers, ten _Laden_-class freighters, two _Harbinger_-class destroyers, two _Parabola_-class freighters, and one civilian yacht. All identified UNSC vessels have been tagged as commandeered by pirates, some of which have been missing for as long as sixty years. Analysis indicates United Rebel Front."

"Jesus Christ," he swore, slamming his fist onto the control panel, an action which made the screen vibrate for a second. _Filthy rebel bastardsâ€¦ That's all we need._

The Yeti's eyes abruptly lit up with a fiery brilliance. "Sir, a transmission from URF destroyer _Guernica_, originally the UNSC _Excalibur_ before its capture in 2532. URF Fleet Admiral Roberta Duffy wishes to speak with the commander of UNSC forces. After the trouble with Hood, the UEG is inclined toâ€¦"

"Yes, yes," he snapped, scowling at the name. The self-declared 'Anarch' Duffy was responsible for the deaths of millions of UNSC soldiers through her promotion of hostile ideologies alone, to say nothing of the troops she directed. "Put it through."

The screen flickered, the default ONI emblem replaced with the face of the enemy. She sat proudly in the captain's chair, a skinny thing barely forty with purple-streaked hair far longer than UNSC regulation would have tolerated, making her appear more like a pop-icon than a serious adversary. "Fleet Admiral Duffy," he acknowledged through gritted teeth.

Her mouth turned upward in a sneer. _"Colonel Ackersonâ€¦ I must say, I never expected to meet you on such terms, butâ€¦"_ She laughed, _"I practiced this in the Slipstreamâ€¦ Though we have no love for each other, me of the rebellion and you of the tyrannical empire, we together love and respect the human raceâ€¦"_ Her eyes narrowed. _"And there's no way in hell those Covenant sons-of-bitches are going to take Mother Earth from us! Colonel Ackerson, Fleet Admiral Duffy of the proud and brave United Rebel Front shall stand alongside the United Nations Space Command to protect our homeworld from the alien menace!"_

He raised an eyebrow, his mind processing this new information. As much as he hated to admit it, this could greatly improve their odds of success. "Is that so, Fleet Admiral?"

"_It is,"_ she confirmed. "_My soldiers are prepared to give their lives for their fellow men and women, and are well-suited for battle both in space and on the ground."_

"On the ground?" he repeated. "You're not going on the ground, Fleet Admiral. Not if you have any sense of self-preservation left within you. However, I will connect you with Fleet Admiral Harper to coordinate an attack on the Covenant fleet." As he spoke, he quickly keyed a command that joined their channel with Harper's COM. "Fleet Admiral Harper, Fleet Admiral Duffy."

Her eyes went to the other side of the screen and she bowed her head slightly. "_Magnus Harper? An honorâ€¦|"_"

"_Roberta Duffy,"_ Harper acknowledged stiffly.

"The dear rebel is to assist in the destruction of Covenant forces," he informed Harper. "Take whatever actions will ensure a human victory. I want the rebel fleet used to its full advantage." He considered adding a few other orders to Harper in a private channel, but simply cut the transmissions instead.

"Rebel fleetâ€¦|" Rani gaped. "Is that legal, what you did?"

He shrugged. "Close enough for government work," he muttered quickly to her before his attention was taken by Hanno.

"Sir, honorable intentions aside, the rebels will almost certainly attempt to take advantage of our arrangement to launch an attack on UNSC territory," the Yeti warned him.

"I know," he grimaced. "However, even fireship-prone rebels are better than shielded Covies. Besides, we can use all the help we can get. Even Section Two won't be able to get perfect PR from EXODUS; we could use some human facesâ€¦| even if they will be put in a state of comatose."

7-7-7-7

"To UNSC victory!" Kader downed a glass of beer. It was non-alcoholic, of course, as fake as he was. He had to keep his head if he was to manipulate some chump into taking him off the planet. He smiled at a nearby smartly-dressed Japanese gentleman. "Share a drink with me and toast to the UNSC?"

After his lack of success at the spaceport, he took a train into New Tokyo in hopes of having better luck seducing the upper class. New Tokyo was as much a product of classic UEG arrogance and elitism as it was an extension of the city of Tokyo. While 'Old Tokyo' made up the section of city buildings constructed on land, 'New Tokyo' referred specifically to the superstructure erected on the bay, an open-frame nano-tube pyramid loosely based on the Great Pyramid of Egypt and twelve-times the size, with residential and commercial areas hanging down in pods from sections of the frame like Christmas tree ornaments.

Though the city had succeeded in creating an efficient, artistic, artificial space on which to build, they had also brilliantly illustrated the class divide. Only the superrich could afford to live in the pyramid, in the monument to UEG majesty. Just walking around

in it made Kader feel disgusted. _One more thing we'll have to blow up when we take over._

"I'll drink to that," the man agreed, and they tipped their drinks.

"Taylor Davis," he introduced himself using his alias. "ONI Section One. Here in Tokyo until we retake Pyongyang."

"I'm Franklin Nishimura," the man stated in the slightly off tone of one attempting to appear as though not intoxicated even though they certainly are, "Of Nishimura Communications. Our family has had the good fortune of living in the fifth tier since the Interplanetary War."

"Ah!" He spread his arms as though pleasantly surprised. In truth, he had already thoroughly studied his target's profile and had individually selected him from the thirty or so persons of interest that frequented the bars of New Tokyo. "Then you're the one I should talk to when my chatter malfunctions," he joked.

Nishimura, his inhibitions loosened, joined him in a moment of laughter. "No, that you should take up with the Chatter Protocol Authority. I'm only responsible when it _works_."

They laughed again and poured more drinks. Picking up his chatter, he signaled a traybot to deliver another round of their drinks. He was fortunate that this country carried its unique quirk of ubiquitous humanoid automations â€" one of the few cultural qualities that hadn't been overrun by the imperialistic United Nations â€" as robotic servants were far easier to use as tools of manipulation.

The robot arrived, a sexless human doll molded from smooth white plastasteel. It was dressed in a typical waiter's uniform and held out a tray on which rested their drinks, delivered in transparent unmarked glasses. The robot mumbled something in Japanese with a certain submissive quality and set each glass in front of its owner.

"Thank you," he enunciated carefully, trusting the highly-limited dumb AI to understand.

The robot bowed its head in acknowledgement. _"If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask,"_ a prerecorded message in English played from its speaker. Without tilting the tray it held to a slightest degree, it turned and walked back toward the bar.

He took a sip of the drink he had been given. _Yes, good service. _"So, yeah," he continued, "I was just on my way to Korea when I heard the reportsâ€"

"Terrible," Nishimura cut in. "Absolutely horrific."

He paused a moment to utter a nasty curse at the Brutes that perpetuated the massacre. _Murdering rapist bastardsâ€|_ "No human equivalent to their sinsâ€|" Perhaps untrue, but certainly not within the last hundred years or so.

"My prayers go out to their families," the businessman nodded, taking

another drink.

"When's that singularity supposed to happen anyway?" he asked rhetorically, rolling his eyes.

The technological singularity was a hypothesized event in which technological progress would explode to an unprecedented rate, filling every need and elevating human status to something near immortality. It would create the pure utopia, complete with galactic peace now that no one would lack for anything. This, of course, was pure nonsense.

It was the twenty-sixth century, after all. If it was going to happen, it logically would have already occurred. However, even the URF leaders couldn't rule out the possibility entirely, and funds that should have gone into the legitimate war effort were misused in chasing this fairy tale.

The line of thought pursued was that the reason the singularity hadn't yet happened was because of the UEG law that prohibited Rampancy development in AIs. The great philosophers of centuries past supposed that the singularity was only possible through the interaction and creativity of intelligent machines. Modern day smart AIs had the intelligence, but arguably their creativity only excelled in the Rampant state. So, the logical course of action was to experiment in violating safety laws that were put there for damn good reason. Although Duffy's smart AI, named Kurzweil after one of the 'transhumanist' philosophers, seemed to be maturing reasonably well, the Alice/Fafnir AI proved to be a total disaster that very nearly compromised his cover.

Nishimura just shook his head. The Earthlings didn't even take it remotely seriously.

"So I feel I should be helping," he continued. "I probably should head for the lunar colonyâ€¦ at least that's what my colleagues were doingâ€¦ Just sitting seemsâ€¦" He trailed off as his attention was taken by the hologram playing over the fountain in the center of the bar. Minister Dunn, who had been preaching the usual ONI propaganda, suddenly was showing images of human ships arriving out of Slipspace.

"â€¦_Additional Martian reinforcements,"_ Dunn was saying, _"Are sure to aid us in our victory over the despicable Covenant hordeâ€¦"_

But those ships were clearly not UNSC. _Mako_-class corvettes, the smallest military ship with a Slipspace drive, were discharged from the UNSC arsenal ages ago due to high maintenance requirements. However, the URF frequently made use of them as light warships or just fireships. "Those are rebel ships," he muttered aloud.

"_Unggoy_ rebels?" Nishimura questioned curiously, using the proper name of the 'Grunt' species. He swiveled around to look at the broadcast.

He shook his head, marveling at his good fortune. "Noâ€¦ Just plain old United Rebel Front."

The words barely left his mouth before Nishimura practically growled,

"United Rebel Front!? Terrorist bastardsâ€¦ Do you have any idea what they've done to Misriah? They're destroying the economy, not to mention the war effort! Here above Earth?"

He thought quickly on how to turn this to his advantage. "Section Two has to already know. This is their deception," he noted. "If the rebel scum's attacking us, we need every man at his station! Listen, do you think I could commandeer one of your company's shuttles? I need to get to the lunar base at once!"

"Say no more," Nishimura nodded, pulling his chatter from his coat pocket. Kader noted that rather than using his company's high-quality products, the businessman used a typical color-changing model with a transparent image of the Dog, a comedic pop culture figure, stamped on the cover. "Granddaughter made it for me," he offered as explanation.

Kader nodded. _Excellent,_ he smiled to himself. If there was a URF fleet here, that meant safety was close at hand. Well, enough safety as one could reasonably expect during a war. Despite his elation, he kept his face tense to not give himself away while his drinking buddy called in a favor. _Should be smooth sailing from here._

Abruptly, the hologram changed. Dunn's broadcast was minimized as a local news feed took its place. The reporter spoke only Japanese, a language he didn't understand, but the image spoke for itself.

The Grand Tokyo Tower, the landmark to which _Ascension_ was frequently compared, was smashed and burning. His first thought was that the Covenant were attacking. However, a clip taken from a CCTV camera clearly showed a C709 Longsword collide with the orange-painted skyscraper, sending it into a cascade of flames.

"Rebel bastards," Nishimura seethes.

He nodded, muttering his own curses for his beloved faction. However, truly he was doubtful of the URF's involvement in this particular attack. _Why would they waste a Longsword on some Earth landmark?_

He supposed it could be some local rebellion unrelated to the URF. _Perhaps some crazy pilot wanted to make historyâ€¦_ More likely, it was just some kind of malfunction. _This kind of thing happens now, everyone gets jumpyâ€¦_

He glanced over at Nishimura, who had meanwhile resumed dialing. _Best to get going, anywayâ€¦_

7-7-7-7

Dr. Stephan Tallentyre bit his lip worriedly as he eyed the sonar screen. There was no doubt about it. A large Cetacean pod, likely composed of sixty-some individual whales, was swimming past the _Sinatra_ research station and toward the small island of Niihau to the southeast.

That in its own right was highly unusual and perhaps cause for alarm. Although the Hawaiian Islands were along the path of humpback whale pods, this appearance broke the established pattern entirely. In

fact, given the whales' bloated appearances, it would appear that they weren't humpbacks at all. _Maybe pilots? Or rights?_

In any case, the ONI bastards that had taken over his little two-man research station had issued an Earth-wide order to murder any whale on sight because of a few tragic incidents that were only the result of the UNSC's own destructive power. He had been a member of the Galactic Peace Foundation for the past sixteen years, and damned if he was going to let the warmongers in the UEG have their way. It was their fault humanity suffered, after all. If the greedy capitalists had just let the Covenant have their holy ground that was the human colony of Harvest, the entire war could have been averted.

He brought up _Eloise_, his personal AI, with an avatar featuring the likeness of his wife. Not for the first time, he felt a throb of sadness swell through him. Seeing her face again, hearing her voice ("Eloise Personal Assistant!")â€|

He had thought that by replicating her features he would miss her less. Instead, he only missed her that much more. _And we would be together now if not for the PM's bloodthirst._

Because of the UEG's desperate need to assert the superiority of humanity, his wife had been taken from her home and placed directly into the line of fire. Because the Covenant committed the great crime of actually wanting to exist in the same galaxy and practice beliefs contrary to those sanctioned by the UEG, entire planets of innocents were sent to die for nothing more than to satisfy the warmongering ministry. "Eloise," he commanded the AI, "Delete all sonar records created within the past hour, and disable automatic saving for a period of thirty minutes."

7-7-7-7

"I have to thank you again, my friend," Kader said with a smile. Much to his amusement, the capitalist had insisted he escort him to the spaceport. They now sat together at a row of seats on the maglev train, which had sped out of New Tokyo several minutes ago and was heading for the station nearest the spaceport. Finally, he could escape the hostile planet and join his brothers and sisters of the URF.

"Not at all," the businessman shook his head. "It's people like you who are truly deserving of thanks. Without the service of ONI, we would have fallen long ago."

He could only smile broadly for fear of laughing should he dare to open his mouth. The irony was incredible. He instead concentrated his attention on the ubiquitous ONI broadcast playing from screens set in the seats in front of them, not to mention the ceiling. The train companies normally used such monitors to further their capitalistic agenda through commercials attuned to customer identities, a practice that seemed to have halted with the Covenant invasion. He considered it a potential stroke of good luck in this case, given that he had barely constructed the Davis profile and it might have triggered some ad of an embarrassing nature.

"â€|_For our children and our children's children,"_ the Minister of Information was saying. _"Earth was the ground from which human life emerged. All of us are indebted to her and we shall not let her down!"

Fight now in defense of our homeworld, our mother. Serve your government and serve her! Fight for her! Do not let the vile Covenant rape our mother likeâ€"_"

The propaganda cut out again, to be replaced by another local broadcast. However, while the previous interruption had been made by civilian news coverage, this was clearly military. A UNSC General sat in full uniform, six armed soldiers visible behind him, their hefted battle rifles a show of power and authority. The General spoke in rapid, excited Japanese, to which Nishimura listened intently. Fortunately for Kader, the broadcast provided English subtitles to allow him to understand.

"Good God," he whispered, stunned at the severity of the message. The broadcast was a warning urging all civilians to immediately evacuate the city. He would have assumed that there were invading Covenant but for the fact that there were no visible ships, the sky clear. Furthermore, they were cautioning not to go anywhere near dead bodies and to report their existence immediately. _What in the galaxy could get them so freaked out?_

The only answer he could think of was biological warfare. If the Covenant had harnessed some deadly pathogen, it would explain the cause for alarm and why the UNSC wanted to discourage physical contact with the dead. He had never heard of any incident of Covenant utilizing this tactic in the entire history of the war, but there were few other possibilities. _Perhaps the Brutesâ€|?_

In any case, this changed the scenario a good deal. If there was even the slightest chance he was infected, he couldn't risk infecting the URF fleet. He would have to follow the proper quarantine procedures for the safety of his people.

"This changes a lot," he said aloud. He filled Nishimura in on his hypothesis.

"I see," the businessman nodded. "Has this happened before?"

"Not to my knowledge," he replied. Biological threats were rare even among human warfare. The costs of epidemics were too severe and risked massive deterioration of all factions involved. _It would be a Brute tactic._

When the train arrived in the station, he and the other passengers were ushered out by men in military uniforms. They were neither Marines nor clear ONI â€" the UNSC probably couldn't spare them â€" but rather the ordinary military police. Trusting the judgment of the authorities here, he allowed himself to be herded along through the station along with the crowd of civilians and soon lost sight of Nishimura.

One of the MPs shouted to be heard over the clamor of wondering voices. "Remain calm! _Manatiling kalmado_!" He repeated the phrase in several languages.

There must be numerous refugees from other countries, he decided. After all, if the Covenant were sparing the islands, then to where else would frightened civilians flee?

A uniform-wearing man stepped forward in front of the crowd. In his

hands was an M6B handgun. Although not as impressive a weapon as the mainstream M6C, it did come with an electronic scope attachment characteristic of the later M6 series. Assuming the MP had the appropriate equipment, the scope would register directly onto his HMD, eliminating the need to peer into the lens. As displays to control civilians went, it was an effective show of power. _Just who does he intend on shooting?_

The man spoke to the crowd with an authoritative urgency, first in Japanese and then in English. "Our city and our people are in extreme danger. Covenant attacks have threatened the entire Pacific. Please, I insist that you all evacuate in an orderly, compliant manner. No harm will come to you as long as you follow the rules. I will lead you to a shuttle that will deliver you from harm's way, but you must all behave! Do _not_ wander from this group. Do not bother yourselves with rescuing possessions. Take only what you have now and discard anything that will hinder your progress. Should any person be injured, please report this at once! Now, everyone, please follow me!" He began shouting the same speech in other languages after that, and it wasn't until he finished it up in Russian that he started leading the way.

'_Please', huh?_ Kader thought in weak amusement. _Makes it optional, I supposeâ€|_

The crowd was herded quickly through the platforms at a pace that could be called orderly, if not for the fearful tension running through everyone. The situation was enough to put even the most experienced veteran on edge, and to these inexperienced civilians it was for all purposes the equivalent of the brutal Rain Forest Wars fought back in 2162. To make matters worse, every individual felt empathetically the tension of their neighbors and in turn became more stressed out, leading to a positive feedback loop greatly heightening the stress of the group as a whole with no sign of slowing.

Suddenly, a great _thump_ was heard from somewhere outside, accompanied by a simultaneous flickering of the lights. Someone gave a shout, which was soon picked up by several other people. _Was that a bomb?_

"Remain calm!" the MPs insisted, but it was clear that even they were concerned.

Mr. M6B took up the pace. However, as he started to lead them left (the direction of the thump) into a large corridor, he was met by a very excited security guard. Although the guard spoke no English, Kader was easily able to deduce the content of his words.

No, don't go this way, he translated. _This is a bad way. Go somewhere elseâ€|_

Mr. M6B did just that, leading the group toward another corridor leaving in the opposite direction. Several of the other MPs, however, joined the security guard down the left corridor. While one began to erect a makeshift barrier to keep civilians away, the others drew weapons and began a cautious advance down the corridor. From what little he saw, it was a clear military action.

This isn't just a biological threat, he realized. _It's an attack._

But just how had the Covenant arrived undetected? Furthermore, why would they bother to conceal their approach? The Covenant depended very little on stealth, much of their strength built on brute force supported by their superior technology. The Brutes especially!

Besides, he thought, _If there are Forerunner artifacts to be found beneath the island, why have they not attacked yet?_ Surely there were more important battles to be fought elsewhere.

A new sound, a _bang_, came, this time from farther up ahead. Scared whimpers emerged from the mouths of frightened civilians, blending together into a collective sob. Panic was rising quickly in their hearts. All knew what Brutes did with their prisoners.

Damn it, he inwardly seethed. _If there are Brutes, we can't defend ourselves._ No one even had a gun. Their lives rested in the hands of the MPs. He prayed they were good shots.

As it turned out, their guide proved his skill with the M6B almost immediately after Kader's worried musing. As the MP turned the corner, a trio of shots rang out, the explosive _booms_ echoing around the room and freaking out the evacuees. Though the crowd was urged back, Kader forced himself to the front.

Two men were dead. Corpses of what looked like MPs lay on the floor in pools of blood. One was mostly intact, save for the hole in the center of his forehead. He held a gun still clenched in his hands and held outward as if preparing to fire, a savage expression of twisted fury frozen on his features. The other corpse, however, was cut into multiple gory pieces, the arms and legs completely severed from the torso. Unlike the fury of the other corpse, this dead soldier's face held the expression of pure terror.

"What the hell?" he cried in shock. Had an MP spontaneously transformed into a homicidal maniac? A strange thought of rabies flitted through his brain, but he discarded it. _Nonsense._

His attention was taken at once by the loud _bang_ emerging from a restroom door thirty feet away, jostling a Blast soda machine that had been pushed up against it and was barricading it. Scuff marks on the floor showed the recent moving of the vending machine. _That thing had to have taken both of them to shove over to the doorâ€¦|_

So, what did that mean? They had worked together to barricade the door before one brutally murdered the other. It made no sense, but it seemed accurate.

Then, with a final _bang_, the door blew outward, toppling the vending machine on its side and causing it to skid across the room. Mr. M6B screamed and rushed the crowd back away from the door as fast as possible. Kader, however, remained still, focused on the creature that emerged from the door.

It had once been a civilian woman, the remnants of a blue dress still there clinging to its body. Although once human, its form was hideously disfigured, graying green flesh twisted around to create a lurching combat form. Flood.

He was frozen in place, unable to move despite the fear that now swept through him. The _Flood_ were here, on Earth, unrestrained. The world was doomed. He was doomed.

The combat form gurgled. Tendrils from its chest waved around, probing the air.

Tasting me, Kader thought. His eyes swept over the corpses, a new understanding in his mind. _Of course. Remove the limbs and you remove the body's usefulness for Flood consumption._ It made sense.

There would be one less Flood host in the world, thanks to the wacko MP. He felt a twinge of sorrow for the dead soldier. If he hadn't been so jumpy, he would still be alive and on their side. _UNSC and URF are the same now,_ he realized. _The Flood will consume us all, nonexclusively._

His eyes focused on the handgun still clenched by the corpse. He didn't think. He just lunged for the weapon. Ripping it from the dead hands, he swung it around to fire on the attacking Flood form as it came for him.

The 12.7 mm x 40 semi-armor-piercing rounds slipped cleanly into the Flood's dead body without slowing it down. It snapped a long tentacle toward him like a whip and he found himself knocked across the room and slammed into the far wall. Gasping, he was barely able to think as the Flood leaped up into the air with a loud cat-like screech. However, in the midst of his blurred recollection of Flood physiology, he remembered that a Flood infection form occupied the host within the chest cavity. Aiming for the center of the host body, he fired.

The Flood jerked in a sudden spasm and came crashing down, limbs settling quietly. The infection form had been killed, leaving the host body intact. _A puppet with its strings cut._

He took a moment to breathe, trying to recover from the shock. Letting out a soft groan, he assessed his status. He had definitely been hurt in the attack (God, everything hurt!), but he didn't think he was too wounded to function properly as a soldier. He carefully raised himself up and took a cautious step forward.

No, he was alright where it counted. He could walk, he could fight, and he was armed. _But, good God, that's gonna hurt in the morning!_

If there was a morning.

He had recovered enough. He approached the bodies and rifled through their garments for more ammunition. Not only was there more ammo, but a second gun stuffed in the back waistband of the more or less intact corpse, along with a somewhat bloodied combat knife in a sheath. It felt strange to scavenge the dead like a pirate, but it was essential to both be armed and to keep arms out of reach of the Flood.

To that end— Unsheathing the knife, he set to work finishing the job he started. Swallowing the contents of his stomach that threatened to rise up, he sawed the limbs away from the two torsos, negating the possibility of infection forms using them as their

hosts. The tissue of the combat form he found easier to cut, though the body poured out a foul-smelling green liquid he supposed aided the infection form's ability to control the victim or perhaps digest it.

The ugly deed done, he turned away and faced the door. It was his duty to see that no Flood was able to hurt his kind. His sense of duty went beyond simple ties of loyalty to the United Rebel Front or his feelings toward the United Earth Government, but embraced every member of the human race as his own blood. _This is our city._

He pushed open the door and strode through, ready to defend his people. He found himself in a somewhat trashed women's restroom with a thin layer of water coating the floor, the originating leak heard gurgling from somewhere nearby, no doubt from one of the numerous toilets. The stalls themselves were closed, potentially concealing enemies. He would have to check each one.

Gun at the ready, he advanced. He knocked each door open with the barrel of his gun, prepared to fire on a crouching Flood form lurking within. The first few he checked, however, were entirely empty and he began to relax. He shoved that instinct away and tensed his grip. He could not afford to relax in the middle of a Flood invasion.

When he approached the end of the room, he found the point of entry: a window smashed open with a hurled newspaper box. The sight drove home what he already knew. The Flood were here, in the city, and they were moving unhindered. _How many other cities have they attacked? Can Earth be saved?_

The questions would have to wait for another time. He had a job to do. He continued to check each of the stalls, one by one. When he came to the last three, he made a grisly discovery.

The stall's toilet had been smashed, producing the source of the water leak. Wrapped around the plumbing was something that resembled fungal growth. It was Flood â€" that he could tell for certain â€" but it was not a form with which he was familiar. Spherical pods grew like alien mushrooms, each covered with vein-like web pattern. The color and odor were distinctly Flood. Whatever it was, he was certain he did not want it there.

He sucked in a breath through his teeth and turned away from the growth. Though he despised its presence and did not trust it in the least, he had to make sure the room was secure. So, he returned to his task of checking each stall, half expecting a combat form to leap out from the infestation behind him at any moment.

However (thank God!), there were no such attacks. The other stalls were empty, leaving only the smashed window as a source of danger in addition to the mysterious growth. For now, he chose to deal with the growth.

Not wanting to waste a round of ammo on this thing, he drew the blade and advanced on it. Kneeling down in the wet stream of water, he eyed the largest of the 'mushrooms', about the size of his palm. After a moment's hesitation, he plunged the knife point into it, causing it to pop like a balloon.

With a hiss, the burst pod released a foul-smelling brown-green gas

into the air. The cloud hovered for a moment before dissipating. Wrinkling his nose, he let loose on the growth, stabbing it viciously.

Flood gas leaked into the air, making him retch, but he did not relent. When all the pods were burst, he set about carving it up. He hacked it all up into little bite-sized chunks, freeing the pipe and causing a strong flow of water to carry the pieces away. _Flooding to stop the Flood,_ he thought in grim amusement.

That liability taken care of, he approached the broken window. Stepping up to it, he peered outside. The street below was filled with debris, as though a riot had taken place. Crashed cars were evident causes of civilian deaths, as were the infection forms squirming around them. The city was truly under siege by an alien parasite.

But it did not belong to them. Not yet, anyway. He heard a scream in the distance, carried by the wind. Not a Flood screech, but a pained human cry of terror. There were people in trouble.

And he would respond. It was all he could do. It was his duty. He fired a round into the largest swarm of infection forms, causing a chain reaction as each Flood's bursting caused its neighbor to burst apart. _Yep, that got their attention._

Now the Flood would be coming for him, and he decided to leave at once to draw them away from the station. Maybe he could even rescue the civilians. That is, if he could save himself.

Knocking away the jagged shards of glass, he slipped through the opening and fell down to a narrow stretch of roof below him. _That was close,_ he thought as he caught his balance. _Too close._ There would be no room for error. The slightest injury could be his undoing.

He crept along the roof, heading for a fire escape several meters away. He prayed silently for protection as he approached it, and made a jump from the roof onto it. An aggressive screech greeted him.

Combat forms. Three. They leaped up from ground level with fantastic strength to meet him.

Snapping his pistol up, he caught the second in the chest, killing the puppeteer inside and causing the body to fall. The other two landed safely on the fire escape, and there was no time to fight. He had to run. Fast.

He jumped for the ladder and slid down to the next level. The Flood on top took a limited time to react, one jumping right after him and the other jumping down the levels from outside in only a second later. Pulling the gun up, he caught the first in its knee, drawn up to protect its chest.

The alien lanced out with its whip-like appendage aimed at his head. He ducked, aware of the Flood coming up behind him. He was surrounded. He spun around, hoping to get one last shot at it— just in time to see it get blown apart by a storm of bullets.

A Pelican! The dropship hovered above the street, its open troop bay packed with battle-ready Marines. His saviors had come in the form of UNSC Marines.

He surged for the edge of the platform, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the combat form. He fired a couple rounds into it in hopes that it would delay its response. There was no notable effect.

The Marines managed to take it out, however. Not only were they equipped with standard assault rifles and the odd sniper rifle, but the woman in front wielded the powerful M6D PDWS. The large silver pistol, with its heavier explosive rounds, was far more effective at killing Flood than his piece of crap M6B. Just a few shots later, the combat form was down for the count. He fired directly into the chest cavity to make sure, and then set about cutting the limbs off.

"Hoorah!" one of the Marines shouted in victory. "That's why you don't mess with Earth!"

As he finished the dismemberment, the Pelican carefully maneuvered the troop bay opening so that it lined up with the fire escape platform. Soon he was joined by two muscular soldiers, one of whom put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him away from the Flood.

"That's a good job," the Marine complemented, an Australian accent evident. "Fire's the only way to be sure, though."

He was ushered into the Pelican troop bay and strapped into a seat. Meanwhile, the two big Marines covered the combat form pieces with gasoline. Stepping back onto the dropship, the Australian swiped a match across his palm and casually flipped it on the bodies, setting them aflame.

He raised an eyebrow at the soldier. "So, what, you don't feel pain?"

The Pelican began to fly outward, leaving the flaming fire escape behind. The irony didn't escape him. _Heh._

The Marine laughed. "Oh, I _feel_ itâ€¦ I just think that you can't possibly dominate your enemies if you're not in control of yourself first. Pain is a feeling, _distinct_ from suffering. Learn to separate the two and you can be in control of your own suffering, and keep your enemies from controlling you with it. Name's Chowdhury, by the way. Rory Chowdhury."

"Taylor Davis," Kader shared. A thought flitted through his brain of inquiring about leaving for Luna. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he harbored thoughts of bombing this city, though the reality was probably more like twenty minutes. Now he wanted nothing more than to see its people safe. Safe and seceded from the UEG. "Mind telling me what the hell's going on, Chowdhury?"

Chowdhury shook his head. After a moment's thought, he obliged. "Big Covenant ship arrived. Big Covenant ship was shot down out of orbit. Debris rained in the Pacific. Fast breeding alien parasite got looseâ€¦" He shrugged. "All Hell with it."

"And the Covenant?" he questioned.

Shrugging, Chowdhury started to explain, when he was interrupted by the pilot announcing multiple hostiles. The Pelican soon moved into view of a massacre packed street. Civilians ran in panicked crowds, chased by Flood of all forms.

"Let's get tactical!" one of the Marines cried, and the unit opened fire.

"C'mon, Davis," Chowdhury encouraged. "Just don't hit the civilians and you'll do fine."

Rolling his eyes, he raised the M6B. While not as flashy as the M6D, he was able to use a scope to better his precision. He tried to focus his fire on the infection forms, leaving the bipeds to the Marines.

He was therefore quite confused when a Marine yelled, "Manhole!"

Then the Pelican jolted from an impact and began to veer sharply to one side. He backed out of the scope to try to figure out what was going on. The Marines were all freaking out.

"It threw it!" Chowdhury gasped in astonishment and outrage. "It goddamn threw it! Like a goddamn fucking outfielder!"

The Pelican crashed into the side of an apartment building, violently shaking them all from impact. He thanked his lucky stars he complied with putting his seat belt on. Otherwiseâ€¦

The pilot didn't make it. The bird had crashed head first, and the pilot was crushed in the impact. They were grounded.

"Alright, Marines," the Corporal snapped. "We've got seven blocks to get past before we can even think about relaxing! Keep your fingers on the triggers and God in your hearts and we might just make it through this. Remember, it may look like Tokyo out there, but it's hostile ground like any other."

He sighed. It seemed impossible. This was the Flood they were dealing with, after all. This was the threat that drove the Forerunners to point a gun at the head of the universe and pull the collective trigger. Could they hope for any better?

"Alright," the Corporal declared, her speech concluded, "Let's do this, Marines!"

They took their show on the road, running for safer territory while shooting hostiles in their path. It was madness. The city was under siege from all directions.

The Flood were startlingly alien. Even the Covenant shared some degree of similarity with humanity, their respective civilizations not too different when all came down to it. Their cultural values and systems of government stood the real difference. But the Floodâ€¦

The Flood acted selflessly, with a form of social cohesion Koslovics only dreamed about. It was as if each individual Flood was a chess piece adding to the conquest of the board, pawns sacrificing themselves without a second thought. _Like ants,_ he thought, firing a round into a swarm of infection forms.

Even the Drones didn't behave like that, though. And the Drones literally were insectoid, closer to ants physiologically than the Flood. The Flood were unlike anything he had ever heard of before. _Maybe they are the perfect life form,_ he thought grimly.

Glass showered down on them. He spared a glance upward and saw that the windows of the above buildings had been smashed outward, along with pieces of the walls; a chunk of bricks landed on a parked car, nearly crushing the old man hiding in the passenger seat. Combat forms appeared and began to leap from the buildings. "Up high!"

The Marines and he fired round after round into the combat forms, infection forms, and carrier forms that attacked them. There were always more. They continued to attack and learn and swarm. There were an endless number of hosts available, and the Flood gained strength at every moment. He was beginning to understand why the Forerunners built the Halos.

Then Chowdhury started screaming bloody murder. An infection form had made it onto the Marine's back and was burrowing into his flesh. It was too deep to be removed.

Kader fired.

The infection form popped, causing Chowdhury to fall like a puppet with its strings cut. The Marine moaned loudly, a wailing cry of despair. Not pain.

Kader fired the next round into his friend's forehead. "Cover me," he snapped to the nearest Marine, and darted to the corpse. Retrieving his gun and ammo, he paused to saturate the body with gasoline and light it aflame with one of Chowdhury's strike-anywhere matches. _Only way to be sure._

It wasn't long before a new threat emerged. An enormous Flood form burst _through_ an entire building. It was four meters tall, and seemed to have been put together from a number of bodies attached like Frankenstein's monster. The beast possessed colossal whip-like tentacles that it snapped into the crowd of fleeing humans, killing with each blow. Infection forms were quick to spill out from around its feet and leap to feed from the dead. Fortunately for them, a threat this big attracted the military.

Warthogs charged down the road towards them. When they got within range, the .50 caliber machine guns opened fire on the creature. The creature's only response was to lunge forward. Then the gauss cannons opened up.

This had the proper effect. Large, messy holes were blown in the flesh of the Flood form. Though he was unsure if the infection form (infection forms?) inside had been killed, the body was certainly too messed up to be of further use. He had another pleasant surprise when Spider Sentinels joined them.

The arachnid-like automations ran out from behind the Hogs with frightening agility. Human machines could never capture the lifelike grace of the Forerunner tech, something he felt he had to admire. That and the way the Sentinels excelled at killing Flood.

As the Sentinels fired laser beams to purge the Flood with precision burns, he noted another way in which the Flood were alien. Knowing the history the Flood had with Forerunner technology, he would have expected the Flood to react with sudden anger and hatred. This was human nature, and it spanned even to the species of the Covenant. Not Flood.

The Sentinels presented a unique threat to the Flood, and the Flood vied for their destruction. That was it. There was no surge of anger, only cold emotionless need for conquest. Hunger.

The Marines defended the Sentinels, however. Warthog chain guns were now used to obliterate the swarms of Flood infection forms, and gauss cannons blew apart combat forms before they got close. Kader, along with several civilians, boarded a Troop Transport Hog. Like anyone, he was desperate to get out of that hellish slaughterhouse.

The Hog took off, driving him into UNSC-held territory. He could finally relax, but instead he felt more tension than ever. Forcing his way to the front, he spoke to the driver, "Hello, sir! My name is Taylor Davis! I am a naval officer with the Office of Naval Intelligence! I have urgent business to attend to on Luna and must get there as soon as possible!"

"You listen to me, Davis," the Marine growled, "I don't care if you're the fucking Queen of Neptune! Every one of these evacuees gets the same priority! Understand?!"

He could tell there was no arguing with him. "Understood."

He sat down in his seat and looked back at the Warthogs and gleaming Sentinels still firing away. Shortswords snapped through the air, soaring over their heads, and he followed their path with his eyes. The fighters were making a beeline for the burning Grand Tokyo Tower.

Of course. That was how the Tokyo outbreak started. The plane that crashed there must have had Flood inside it. Perhaps the Flood even crashed it there on purpose.

His train of thought was lost as the car skidded to an abrupt stop. Someone screamed. He turned and looked up ahead.

Another monstrous Flood creature had popped out from around an international-style building and was directly attacking the UNSC forces. Marines got out turrets and let loose streams of bullets that punched into its body, seeming to slow it down a bit. Then the great beast exploded.

A Scorpion tank rolled out into view. It had fired the 90mm shell that killed it. Heavy armor, he thought, smiling as the Hog started moving again. He started to think maybe it would be alright. Maybe the power of the UNSC was enough to stop the ancient Flood menace and succeed where even the Forerunners could not.

He and the other evacuees were brought to the Tokyo spaceport, which had been fortified and defended by the UNSC. He was ushered with the group into one of fourteen hastily erected decontamination tents. Eager to escape the besieged city, he complied with their decontamination regulations and allowed them to take his clothes and equipment.

He underwent the vigorous cleaning process. The soaps and shampoos used were so strong they were practically caustic. Although it was very much understandable and appropriate given the dire circumstances, he still allowed himself to loudly swear when it stung against his injured flesh. Separating pain and suffering, it seemed, only worked in theory.

"You're English!" a fellow evacuee declared in satisfaction as he heard Kader's choice words. He himself spoke with a German accent.

"Australian," he supplied, as that was where he had lived the past few years. "Taylor Davis."

"Ludoviko Wexler," the man introduced himself. "Pure Hell."

It was a bit of a non sequitur, but he understood it perfectly fine. "It's still Tokyo," he stated, shaking his head. "Can't imagine Hell being much worse, though."

The evacuees were, as he had expected, not given back their clothes and were instead placed inside bright white hazmat suits. Seeing the breathing apparatus connected to his suit, he was at once reminded of the dark brown gas emitted by the inanimate Flood growth. _Toxic?_

He wondered what his earlier trek through the city would do to his lungs. However, that was a matter that had potential consequences years down the line. He would be thankful just to make it through this day in one piece.

Marine aides helped him get fitted into the hazmat suit. Glancing at all the men around him wearing the breathing apparatuses, he was reminded of the Grunts with which the UNSC had allied. Like the aliens, human beings were now dependent on gas masks and all had a uniform appearance. _Is this what being a Grunt is like?_ he thought briefly, before deciding it wasn't best to think about them empathetically.

They were herded out into the fading daylight and onto the runways, where Albatrosses waited. The western corner of New Tokyo was rooted at the edge of the peninsula, tying in with the edge of the spaceport. The mighty pyramid reflected the light of the setting sun and threw it back at them as if the spirit of the UNSC expressing bold defiance. _Even when hope is dying we stand strong,_ the hyperstructure seemed to say.

"New Tokyo's safe," Wexler told him, his voice muffled. He too turned to stare at the pyramid. "When the outbreak started, they sealed her up. That's what that guard told me. Once the crisis is over, they'll open her back up again and the New Tokyans can tell us all what it was like sitting around while Old Tokyo went to Hell."

He sighed. If he hadn't tried to con his way out of the city, he'd

have been perfectly safe within New Tokyo. The hyperstructure was a city in its own right and its inhabitants enjoyed the richest comforts the CAA could offer. He might as well have chosen to enjoy their hospitality while he was there.

Excitement started up within the crowd of evacuees as one of the Albatrosses lifted up. This was it. Escape was coming at last. Hope shined strong inside him alongside the reflected sunlight. Everything was going to be alright.

Then a man started screaming. He looked quickly around, trying to determine what was wrong. There was a disturbance among the evacuees. People were pointing, screaming.

He followed their fingers. There was nothing he could see. Then he looked beyond the spaceport and to New Tokyo.

Something gargantuan was sliding out of the bay and up one of the pyramid supports. It looked for a moment like an enormous snake, a sea serpent of legend. Recalling his fears of the end of the world, he thought of the Norse myth of Ragnarök. According to the myth, Jörmungandr, a snake so massive it stretched around the entire world, would rise from the ocean to do battle with Thor, the god of thunder.

However, as the creature climbed higher and higher, he could see that it wasn't a snake at all. This creature was, in fact, composed of a large quantity of tentacles. Instead of many tentacles stemming from a head as he would have expected from a creature of Earth, this alien (for that is what it had to be) seemed to consist of jumbled branches of tentacles all connected together.

"Can you see a head?" Wexler asked him, clearly as terrified as Kader was.

"No," he answered simply. There was none to see.

The creature gained more and more height, and it was plain to see that it was gigantic. The scale of New Tokyo was colossal, and the alien easily wove itself around the beams that made up the city. _Has to be at least two kilometersâ€¦ maybe more._

Squirming, the alien snapped out a tentacle to grab onto a beam several levels above it. _Ooh! Way more._

It struck out again, securing another beam to the east. Another, to the west. Then the north, and then the south. It was anchoring itself in place.

As he watched, the alien then began to puff itself up, like a blowfish almost. The alien's size increased dramatically, filling up the spaces between the sections of New Tokyo. Then it fell back down to its normal size, at the same time emitting a great burst of brown air.

Another person screamed. The crowd shifted with frightened agitation. Everyone saw the creature now, saw it breathing the foul gas out into the atmosphere.

It's terraforming, he realized. The Flood were converting Earth's

atmosphere to match their own. That creature was Flood, which meantâ€¦| _Gravemind._

Then it was a stampede. Everyone wanted to get out of the city that instant. Because everyone knew that staying in the city meant death.

Kader wouldn't later remember the details of the moments that followed. He just knew he slammed himself against his fellow evacuees, trying bitterly to make it to an Albatross. Eventually, he made it aboard a troop bay installed in the normally cargo-exclusive belly of the transport.

The space was minimal, evacuees crammed in tightly. He didn't care about the cramped quarters. He was simply grateful to be alive.

The Flood are here, he thought, dread remaining in his bones. If they had gotten loose in the Pacific, all Pacific islands were in danger. That meant most civilians were at risk. They would have escaped the Covenant only to find themselves victim to a still deadlier threat.

Elsewhere in the world, there was still fighting going on among humans and Covenant. _We need to ally._ It was the only way to defeat the Flood, if it did have any possibility of being defeated. _We need to put our wars on hold to fight this greater menace._ That included the Covenant, the UNSC, and the URF. _We need toâ€¦”_

A brilliant flash erupted from outside the Albatross, shadows inside made null. The aircraft jolted, struck by a shockwave. The screams of the evacuees were punctuated by the subsequent roar that followed the light. The Albatross then started to fall from the sky.

He flew from where he stood and smacked against the ceiling. The other passengers who had been unable to claim a seat shared a similar fate. Screams filled the air and he began to really believe that he would die here, so close to safety.

Some people around him began to pray; others cursed, and still more sobbed. All Kader could think about was a schoolboy's story, a relic of ancient times when men believed foolish things. _When the final battle of the gods comes to pass, the World Serpent shall rise from the depths and poison the sky. Thor shall crush the serpent's jaws with his mighty hammer, but shall succumb to the poison. After the serpent's demise, Thor shall take nine steps and then, himself, fall._

7-7-7-7

Special Operations Commander Tyin 'Nitusee, a proud crewmember of the _Predestined Apotheosis_, growled as his feet came into contact with the dirt-strewn Ark, his warriors shortly behind him. Their mission was relatively simple, albeit frustratingly inconvenient. It seemed the Arbiter had made a miscalculation regarding one of his Unggoy, a miscalculation that threatened the safety of the entire fleet.

The best solution at this point would be to cut off the rebellion at its head, by killing the leaders and displaying their corpses to the Unggoy masses. It was common knowledge that Unggoy were highly dependent on their leaders and would fall into disorganization and

panic at their deaths. To perform this essential task, the Arbiter and Ship Master 'Eewamee selected his unit. 'Nitusee was determined not to disappoint them.

Because of the harsh conditions of the battlefield, he and his warriors were dressed uniformly in aged assault harnesses. While the traditional and quite modern combat harness was widely used for its terror-inducing aesthetic qualities, it did not offer the visual protection of the armor's predecessor. The energy beam emerging from the center of the Ark cast such glaring white light, that it would harm the sight of any who looked upon it with an eye unclothed. The assault harness offered more than adequate shielding for such matters.

"Engage active camouflage," he barked as soon as his warriors were freed from the confines of the gravity lift. Under cloaks of bent light, they dashed for the crevice that housed the entrance to the Ark.

"Excellency, shielded plasma turrets present," reported his sniper.

He could see the dark splotches that must have been the turrets. "Understood," he acknowledged. "Maintain stealth. Do not engage unless we are detected."

As they neared, he signaled for his warriors to slow their paces. Caution was essential to ensure successful undetected entry. Moving slowly, they carefully approached the narrow slot that bore the entrance, its depths cast in shadow.

On each side was mounted three Shade turrets, each operated by an Unggoy clad in green armor. Their heads were each turned away from the energy beam, shielding their eyes from the light. Gloomy shadows covered their undersides, providing a harsh contrast with the glare from above. Because stealth was required at this moment, they allowed the gunners to live and quietly passed them by.

Stepping into the shade, 'Nitusee briefly paused to allow his visual generation equipment adequate time to adjust to the changing contrast. When it finished, he was pleased with the results. While attuned to the enormously bright environment, the entry slot appeared as a blackened gash that scarred the surface of the Ark. Now, however, he could easily see the fine detail engraved in the smooth metal. _No, not engraved,_ he corrected himself, though he knew not the manner in which the fine patterns were rendered in the structure.

"Gah!" an Unggoy yelled in alarm.

He froze, tightening his grip on his plasma rifle. _Have we been detected? Who of us, and by which?_ Flipping his gaze among the gunners, he determined that the Unggoy reacted not to his warriors at all, but rather to what was occurring above their heads.

Three erratically flying Seraphs, which he assumed were commanded by Unggoy, engaged three steadily flying Seraphs, undoubtedly Sangheili. The Unggoy Seraphs were protecting a low-flying Phantom, which was travelling directly toward their current position. _Reinforcements._

The Unggoy were but amateurs in the science of aerial tactics, and could easily be bested by the Sangheili formation. The foolish creatures were actually attempting the use of plasma charges, air-to-ground weapons, against starfighters. When their shots failed to impact their targets, they attempted suicide attacks similar to the tactics employed by Jiralhanae, but the Sangheili craft deftly veered away and launched their own attacks with pulse lasers. One of the Unggoy craft raced to place itself in between the firing craft and the Phantom and successfully obstructed the assault at the expense of its own existence, but a second shot impacted the target and detonated its engines.

'Nitusee and his warriors were now faced with a flaming troop carrier falling rapidly toward them. "Run," he hissed in a fierce whisper, and they dashed forward.

They stopped several units into the crevice when he realized that they were safe. Fortunately, the Phantom pilot managed to overshoot the entry slot entirely and crashed in front of the line. The Unggoy Seraphs now circled overhead to protect the Unggoy reinforcements that fled the burning wreckage.

Perfect, he thought. His lance would take proper advantage of the opportunity to enter the Ark alongside the Unggoy reinforcements.

"Me want food nipple!" one of the Unggoy gunners declared, hopping off its turret. "Me prepare for guests!"

Such lack of discipline, he thought disparagingly. It was wondrous that the Unggoy had managed to cause so much trouble with such poorly trained warriors. This only increased his conviction that the success of his mission would silence this rebellion and restore their submission to the Sangheili.

The Unggoy reinforcements at least were kept within a semblance of order. The Unggoy sent from the Ark to usher them inside insisted that they maintain a single file leading into the Ark. This, however, would ultimately be to their detriment, as he and his warriors would be able to surround them. Should his unit be discovered, none of the Unggoy reinforcements would survive the attack.

7-7-7-7

"_Do you see them?"_ Gedeg asked quietly, his voice heard only by Dibid.

He started to nod, but then remembered that only his voice would be picked up by the transceiver. "Yes," he whispered, glad that no one had seen his embarrassing slip.

The Sangheili were there under cloaks of active camouflage, just as the Major had predicted. Their outlines were just visible, the edges of light bent. He glanced at Gyogyok across from him, hefting his fuel rod cannon, and hoped the other Minor saw his targets.

"_Do you look stupid?"_

He smirked underneath his mask. It was true that the Sangheili all

thought Unggoy were stupid, except for a few like the Arbiter, and would definitely leave their guard lowered. Shifting his own fuel rod cannon to aim directly at the center of the warped light, he let his eyes fall out of focus and his eyelids droop. "Yes," he whispered.

"_Good. Now wait for the right moment."_

The line of Unggoy came forward, and with them the Sangheili. He felt increasingly nervous as they got closer. If Gedeg was wrongâ€¦|

Gedeg is not wrong, he told himself. The Sergeant himself trusted him with command of the Ark. The Sergeant was a prophet; surely he would have foreseen any downfall.

"_Wait for itâ€¦|"_

The Sangheili seemed close enough for him. Too close, in fact. He knew that if the Sangheili got too close, the fuel rod would take him out as well as his target. Truly, this was a _bad_ idea! He started to panic, but forced himself to calm. _Alert the Sangheili and you are dead._

"â€¦|_Now!_"_

The Major did not have to tell him twice. He tightened his grip around the trigger. The cannon bucked against his shoulder, but he was careful to keep the aim down towards the center. Across from him, Gyogyok fired as well.

The resulting explosions sent the bodies of five Sangheili soaring through the air, visible and in unusual dress. Two more Sangheili still lived, but had become visible in the attack. Unfortunately, the explosions also killed three Unggoy, one of whom had his tank ripped open and set ablaze. The rest hurried, frightened, into the safety of the Ark.

The danger, however, was not over. The Sangheili were alerted and were already slipping back into the security offered by active camouflage. Were either of them to fire his cannon once more, the collateral damage would be great, so he and Gyogyok each dropped their cannons and drew the considerably weaker plasma pistols.

Aiming into the space around the Unggoy file, he squeezed the trigger rapidly, careful not to hit his fellows. The trick was not to fall into the trap of letting the charge overload and drain the power. While it was true that overcharging the pistol could release a burst powerful enough to drain a Demon's shield in one shot, it reduced the pistol's overall effectiveness and would currently be dangerous to his fellows.

As according to plan, the plasma shots impacted the Sangheili body shields and made them visible for brief snatches of time. The moments were just long enough for the Unggoy above them, who had abandoned their guns the moment they realized there was a fight in the pathway. An instant later, the plasma grenades flew down and bonded onto the Sangheili body shields.

When the dust settled and all Unggoy new arrivals had made it safely inside, he reported the success of his mission. "All targets have been eliminated," he sent out with a chipper tone to his voice.

"_Excellent,"_ Gedeg said, sounding quite pleased. "_If there are no more Sangheili, I will send a group to scavenge what we can."_

"None I can see," he replied. "E-Excellency, can I ask a question?"

"_Of course you may, Dibid,"_ Gedeg assured him. "_We are all independent Unggoy, free from the rule of oppressors."_

"Oh. Uhâ€¦" He thought back to his question. "How did you know what the Sangheili were to do?"

"_I listened well to my mother's tales, Dibid, especially tales of battle,"_ Gedeg explained. "_The most valuable lesson in the art of battle: Know your enemy better than they know themselves."_

7-7-7-7

Colonel Ackerson seethed as he paced back and forth across the polished floor. He cast a glare back upon the Earth tactical screen. Many of Earth's own powers were now smoldering, and _he_ felt directly responsible.

Technically, it was the fault of the Flood. If they hadn't infested her cities, he wouldn't have had to give the order to destroy them. "How did they get out, again?" he growled.

"Sir," the Yeti bowed his head in a universal gesture of submission, "Evidence suggests animate Flood manifested in indigenous wildlife. It was an error to allowâ€¦"

"I know it was!" he snapped. It didn't matter. He would now have to destroy the entire Pacific to keep humanity safe from the Flood. "Heads will roll for thisâ€¦"

"Sir, Vice Admiral Whitcomb has requestedâ€¦" the Yeti began.

"I know what he's requested!" he cut off the AI. "He's requested that I apologize to the Elites and enlist their help. Well, that's _not_ going to happen. Heâ€¦"

"Sir!"

He turned to see Rani approaching him. "Yes?" he asked with annoyance.

"Sir, sources indicate that the threat of nuclear winter is too high," she insisted. "Already, climate change has been affected by the detonation of the HAVOK nukes, sir, and the fallout is severely affecting her ecosystems. Sir, the Elites can purge the Flood by glassing the cities. Sir, glassing, if performed under certain specifications, can have only a minimal negative effect on her."

"I don't care about fallout," he snapped. "I don't care about nuclear

winter. The Elites are nothing more than evil squid-faced murderers. The people wouldn't stand for it and neither will I."

"Let the Elites glass the infested areas," she insisted, openly defying him. "What the people will not stand for is an ONI Colonel nuking our own planet because of his own racist ideals."

"Rani!" He turned to growl at the girl. "You may be a brilliant assistant, but a strategist you are not. Now, if you refuse to award me the proper respect, so help me God, I will have you pushed out into the frontlines. Understand?"

"Sorry, sir," she muttered, looking properly humble. Then she leaped forward and thrust her pen in his face like it was a sword. It would have been amusing were it not so annoying. An instant later, he felt a whoosh of gas hit his face and he found it hard to breathe.

"Rani!" He tried to knock her away, but it was too late. The effect was done, and he felt a wave of sedation overcome him. "What?" he gasped out. A rebel? He had let a goddamned rebel into his circle? What was ONI coming to?

"General anesthetic," she replied, misunderstanding his question. "What girl in the big city doesn't need a pen full of knock-out gas?"

Angrily, he looked over to Hanno. However, the Yeti was gone. He vaguely observed Rani holding the data crystal chip. Goddamned dumb AIs, he silently grumbled before slipping into blackness.

7-7-7-7

"We stand now to fight"

"We were always lowly, but now we are strong"

"It is our duty as civilized beings to stretch forward, after all"

"All creatures exist to improve, to become greater, to ascend to a higher level"

"As from sentience to sapience, and savage to civilized, we stand now to claim divinity"

"No. The divine is not found from within, nor is it yours to claim. We are the servants of the Almighty."

"We shall not back down, for we have as much right as any who rise from nothing, as your Almighty must have done Himself to even exist in this world as a god"

"Insolent little creatures! You have committed the greatest of crimes, spawned from your own lustful greed! Take barest consolation in that you are blessed with the promise of instant death, while we shall suffer the progress of infinitude!"

Voices whispered from the darkest regions of his mind. Annoying. He

pushed them aside and slipped back into the merciful abyss.

"_But, father, what if it doesn't work?" she demanded, her eyes moist with tears both the product of fear and anger. "What if they win? Then what?"_

"_Now, Tamaa," her father chided, "Don't think like that. It will work. The Prophets are only as strong as we allow them to be. They are nothing without their followers."_

"_But if they doâ€|"_

"_Even if they do, which they won't, we'll still win in the endâ€|"_

"_That's lunacy!" She roughly grabbed her father's arms in an attempt to make him see the truth._

"_Tamaa!" Her mother gently took her aside. "This is the best for everyone. Not only Unggoy, but everyone who lives under the Prophets' tyranny can be freed."_

"_Even if we fall tonight," Rajua went on, "We will plant the seed for victory. Once they â€" Prophets, Sangheili, Unggoy â€" see that defiance can be organized and powerful, they will know that a successful rebellion is possible! The victims can stand proud and take that which been taken from them. Good can triumph over evil, like all the stories say. Maybe not in this life, but we can build our futures here and now."_

"_If the Prophets win, they will destroy us," she countered. "They may not kill us, but they will strip us of our freedoms. You can be sure of that."_

"_Tamaa, I have to do what I believe is right. Please __**take on what duties God has given you**__. I leave __**this Mantle you shall uphold**__ to continue our legacy. Please forgive my __**transgressions**__, dear daughter."_

Voices. Annoying. Trying to make him forgetâ€| What? Meaningless.

There was nothing. There was peace. That was how
>it was supposed
to
>Be.<p>

Jitji gasped as the air flowed into his lungs, filling him up with fire. Oh, surely he was lit up with horrible fire. Was this Hell?

Noâ€| he confirmed as he opened his eyes. _Not unless Hell is a Covenant ship._ The ceiling was clearly made of the purple metal to which he had long since grown accustomed.

Pain washed over him. _Oh, God, the painâ€|_ It was unbearable. Almost. He had to bear it, he couldn't not. There was no other choice.

Was there?

He tried moving, just an arm at first. More pain erupted from his muscles. "Aaaah," he moaned involuntarily. _Nothing but pain exists._

It was in this moment of blinding torture that a thought finally arose: _I'm alive._ It was so simple that he wondered why he had not thought of it before. _I am alive._

Of course, it was obvious now. Pain only existed with life. He was in such pain because he was now living again. _Wait!_

He remembered it vividly, how he had ripped the mask from his face and let the poison enter his lungs. The smothering sensation had removed him of his ability to think. He had seen what was a blur, and then fell. The pain had grown less and less as he slipped into death.

And then! Nothing.

But now he was alive again. He felt again the pains of the world. _Is this what it is like to be born?_ he wondered. _Or is this only what it is like to be born again?_

It was ridiculous. It made _no_ sense. When someone dies, their soul leaves. That was canon! _But! I am here!_

It is God. It was the only answer. God had brought him back to perform some holy task. _I am not yet done here._

Pain, he decided, was good. Pain made him feel alive. _Pain is a gift from God._

Use it, he whispered to himself. _God has given you a gift. Use it well._

He let the pain be. It gave him strength. It _was_ strength in a sense. He could exist with the pain and not let it rule him. Nay, he could take the pain and wield it!

I am alive, he told himself, letting the sensation sink in. The pain told him all his parts were functioning. His legs screamed as he tried the muscles, as did his arms, and his hands, and his fingers too. They were all there.

It was then that he realized his lungs ached as they pumped air in and out of him. However, he wore no mask, nor air tank. This did not look like a methane chamber either. The air smelled foul, like the poison that had entered his lungs.

Channeling his strength, he willed himself to sit up and examine himself and his surroundings. He was as naked as the day he was born, and indeed this was perhaps a day he was born. Numerous dead lay about the chamber: Unggoy, Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar! This was a storage room not the sort of place that would be filled with methane.

What would then remain?

Jitji slowly inhaled a great breath of the air that filled the chamber. It gave him as much strength as methane would any day. _If

this is oxygen, thenâ€¦|_

He exhaled, his breath mingling with the air of the room itself. It was then that he caught sight of a thin cloud of vapor forming from his breath. It was nothing much, only a wispy stretch of brownish-colored air.

He tried to speak, but his tongue caught in a web of agony and a stream of unintelligible sounds issued from his mouth. The sound, however, was real. He was real.

He was Jitji, an Unggoy, who could breathe _oxygen_. It was a miracle like no other. He remembered after a moment Cortana's description of a Human prophet with powers of healing and resurrection. _Could it be fact? Could I be like that prophet?_

Focusing, he carefully sounded out, "Iiiiiâ€¦| aaaaaaaamâ€¦| Jjjjjiiiiitjjjjiiii!" He broke into a fit of coughing. Brown mist flared briefly around his head before dissipating.

He could not speak. Not as he once could. Though he knew the language, the words could not come. The barest he could manage was an approximation.

If that is the price you demand, I will pay, he assured God. _I do not need speech._

However, there was something he had to do, something that must be done. His destiny awaited him. Stumbling out of the pile of death, he rose on two shaking legs that screamed out in a flurry of pain. He looked around carefully and nodded when he saw a Kig-Yar body with a shield still attached to its arm.

I will do your holy work, my God.

7-7-7-7

The Arbiter let out a roar of fury as he regarded the viewer. Jitji's wrath had not relented. Despite the death of their 'prophet', the Unggoy fought hard and with extreme conviction. All of their attempts to retake the Ark had, as of yet, failed, the warriors burned down by Unggoy-controlled Seraphs that prowled the area or razed by Unggoy footsoldiers. He was sure that an Unggoy was converted to the 'revolution' every heartbeat, due to the preaching of an Unggoy known as Gedeg that dominated the battlenet thanks to the facilities of the Ark.

"Calm yourself, Arbiter," 'Setfethee chastised as he stepped forward to stand at the Arbiter's side. "Anger aids no Ship Master."

"True," he sighed, watching as an Unggoy Seraph rammed a Sangheili Seraph, causing both to be annihilated. "By the gods!" he exclaimed from force of habit. "They are as bad as the Jiralhanae!"

He thought of Consus and clenched his fists. What a needless death that was. Consus had been a good warrior, one he had been proud to serve alongsideâ€¦| _Jitji, you vile traitorâ€¦|_

"The Humans are keeping us contained," 'Setfethee noted, drawing the viewer inward to display the Human vessels that fenced them in. "They

contribute nothing to our battle, yet they seek to crowd usâ€| Arbiter, I suspect our hosts may have dark intentions."

"Indeed," he sighed. "This Aakersenâ€| he may well hope the Unggoy slay us all."

We could all penetrate and leave this planet behind, he supposed. However, that would mean leaving the Ark in the hands of Humans and Unggoy. While he trusted Humans to not activate its destructive power, he cringed at the thought of what the Unggoy had the potential to do. _No, our battle is here._

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* * *

>Author's Note:

The concept of New Tokyo is based on the Shimizu Mega-City Pyramid. I thought the concept was absolutely awesome and wanted to write about it. I would also like to make clear that I mean absolutely no offense regarding the atomic bombings. I chose to depict the destruction of Tokyo only as an illustration of the damage brought on by the Flood and the ultimate UNSC response to the crisis, which mirrors that of the Forerunners. The reason for featuring Japan at all was homage to a source of inspiration, an English translation of a story by Haruki Murakami. I feel that the atomic bombings are deeply tragic and mean no disrespect.

26. Hope

Rani slipped her data crystal chip into the holotank. Swallowing nervously, she glanced back at the prone form of Colonel Ackerson. The drug was supposed to last thirty to forty minutes, but should he have not inhaled the proper dosageâ€| She didn't want to think about it.

Running her fingertips over the activation sensor, she was greeted by the familiar stand-by image characteristic of her colonial friend Kamal: a grinning image of the Dog. Technical status information scrolled over the image, much of it hacker slang she didn't recognize. The repurposed dumb AI was doing its job effectively, however, which was all she cared about at the moment.

The stand-by image vanished, to be replaced by Melissa's avatar. The smart AI preferred an idealized feminine form, that of a buxom woman, perhaps in her late twenties, with long flowing hair and a deep golden sheen broken only by black lines and patterns running through her body. Though she was technically nude, the AI had smoothed over certain physical aspects, making her strictly PG.

"Thank you, Rani," Melissa exclaimed as she entered the server via the gateway application. "I'm online, wide awake, physical and copying my primary data structureâ€| Copy complete."

"Melissa, Ackerson had his dumb AI purge nonessential files and encrypt the rest," Rani said, getting right to the point. "He knew we were coming."

"Hmm?" the AI raised an eyebrow. "Goodâ€¦ My job's simpler, then. I know right where to look."

She smiled at Melissa's traditional cockiness. It was comforting knowing that the AI felt on top of things and in control. Like she had suspected, Ackerson and Hanno had no idea of what they were up against.

"Scanning," Melissa intoned as she accessed the data, her eyes flicking back and forth as though reading. "Okay, I see the encryption. Cute, really. Hmmmâ€¦ Okay, a little tricky. Maybe if Iâ€¦ There! I'm in."

"You think Ackerson's sympathetic to the rebel forces?" Rani asked, recalling the way he had allowed Duffy's presence in orbit. The man himself had expressed fear of Section Zero investigating him for that very reason.

Melissa cocked her head in consideration. "Well, nothing in these files to suggest soâ€¦ Nothing to count it out either. The focus seems to be more on the Forerunner artifacts: the Monitor, the Sentinels, the shipâ€¦" She halted in midsentence, her eyes widening. "Hang onâ€¦" Her head turned away, the features of deep concentration visible on her face.

"Melissa?" she questioned. She glanced back at Ackerson again, finding him just as immobile as when she had last looked. "Melissa, what is it?"

The AI looked up as if she had forgotten Rani's presence. Her eyes were filled with wonder. "Daaamn! The shipâ€¦ The Forerunner shipâ€¦" She held up her hands and produced an image of the four-pronged vessel between them.

Rani nodded. "_Ascension_," she supplied the name.

Melissa nodded slowly. "_Ascension_," she agreed, her eyes literally twinkling like glitter. "I-it holds a secretâ€¦ somethingâ€¦ something very interesting. Invaluable if this is correct."

"It could help us win the war?" she asked. "You're talking about a weapon, like the Halos? Hopefully not as destructiveâ€¦"

"No," the AI shook her head. "The Halos destroy life. Thisâ€¦ if it's realâ€¦ if Ackerson hasn't made a mistake somewhereâ€¦ This protects it."

"It heals?" she asked. "So, it's like a medical facility?"

"More like the ambulance to take you to the medical facility," Melissa explained. "_Ascension_'s true purpose is to transport its crew to a hidden Forerunner installation. Once there, according to this, youâ€¦ you don't die. _According to this_, " she stressed, "The Forerunner installation can make youâ€¦ well, immortal."

"Immortal?" she exclaimed in a whisper. The suggestion was outlandish, impossible, butâ€¦ "_Seriously_? Youâ€¦ Oh, Lord." If it _was_ possibleâ€¦

"The Monitor calls the installation Heaven," Melissa continued,

raising an eyebrow at the name. "The Covenant also seem to reference it as their 'Divine Realm', although it's hard to separate true science from their religious mythology." Her hologram displayed her running a hand through her hair as if an absentminded-trait, although it was almost certainly a deliberate action. "There's also reference to it as the shield to the sword of the Halos."

"Heavenâ€|" she mumbled. "Oh my Godâ€|" The religious significances of the Forerunner installations were obvious, and if it was possible that the Bible could have referenced, not mythological items of faith, but true distorted visions of physical locationsâ€| She didn't want to think about the potential implications.

"Hmm." Melissa smirked with approval. "Looks like Ackerson meant to keep this little discovery from HIGHCOM. Should be grounds for permanent comatose."

"_Good_," she said with a good bit of loathing. She had thought her old enemy Major Standish was the lowest a man could get, until she worked with Colonel Ackerson. Standish was only corrupt and power-hungryâ€| Ackerson completely gave her the heebie-jeebies.

"It goes without saying that WANDERER will take great interest in our discovery," Melissa said with a chuckle. "Immortalityâ€| It makes _Ascension_ valuable indeed."

"To everyone," she added, the wonder of it starting to leak into her mind. If it was possible that there was no afterlife, thenâ€| that just made this life that much more important. _Everyone should have this giftâ€|_ "Melissa! Everyone should be able to take advantage of this! My God, think of the possibilities! _No more death_. It's like the gateway to Galactic Peace!"

"Slow down, now, Rani," the AI cautioned, holding up a hand. "We're still in a war, after all. If the word gets out now, it will be total chaos. Everyone will be trying to get _Ascension_ to use it for themselves or destroy it as a heresy or something. The UNSC is doing their best to retain control of the Arkâ€|" she trailed off, focusing intently. "Oh, _no_â€| _Ascension_ is currently in the hands of the Gravemind!"

"The Gravemind?" Rani swallowed, seething with hate for the mass-murdering alien menace. "Flood? _Immortal_ Flood? Jesus Christ, this can't be happeningâ€|"

"Don't worry, Rani," Melissa said, smiling in an attempt to comfort her. "The Flood aren't in Heaven yet, and from what it looks like it's a pretty complicated process to actually get there. For one thing, Heaven isn't even in realspace. It's in Slipspace. The Forerunners somehow managed to erect a permanent bubble within the folds of the universe. It's a perfect hiding place because it's impossible to get to unless you know exactly where it is, and even then Heaven's security protocols will only allow _Ascension_ to enter."

"And here I thought _Ascension_'s name referred to the way it moves," she said with a weak chuckle. She was completely overwhelmed by the revelation, and humor came naturally. _Immortalityâ€|_ It wasn't even something she knew how to think about. Not in a concrete physical way. Her thoughts went to the scientists who first studied the quanta

â€" a whole world of illogical behavior. She wondered if her stumbling thought processes echoed theirs, a resonating confusion at the ever-expanding levels of illogic making up the nature of the universe.

"And to even get _Ascension_ to take you there," Melissa continued, "You needâ€" well, not coordinatesâ€" There's no space in Slipspaceâ€" But _instructions_, rather, to tell the computer what to do. And the Forerunners didn't just write them down in one place. No, they broke it into several different parts, which they protected in different locations all throughout the galaxy. The UNSC currently has three of the seven parts. Ackerson thinks the Covenant have more. If the Flood don't have the full set of instructions, they can't use _Ascension_. Moreover, _Ascension_'s at the heart of a massive battle. The fate of the universe is still undecided."

She started shaking. "Melissa?"

"Yes, Rani?" the AI questioned.

"Do you think there can be a way out?" she asked, half unsure what she was saying. She continued speaking, hoping to get the message across. "There's been so much deathâ€" so much sufferingâ€" Can there be a way out of it all? _Can_ the shipâ€" Can _Ascension_â€" take us free?"

Melissa seemed to understand. "I don't know, Rani," she said simply. "I don't know if any of it is possible."

"We have hope, though," she noted.

"Yes."

7-7-7-7

Sergeant Major Avery Johnson wiped the grime from his face. The battle to control Mombasa was as good as won. Whether or not ONI had sent him there to die, he supposed they owed him a medal now.

He frowned as he scanned the horizon. Something had changed. He knew _that_ much at least.

As he contemplated the change, whatever it was, he felt a strange numbing sensation in the back of his mind. It felt likeâ€" _Flood_. He could remember it vividly, how the Infection Form buried its tentacle inside him. He had felt that numbing feeling then and it was back.

He shook his head, trying and failing to rid himself of that awful feeling. _PTSD flashback?_ he wondered. There was something else too.

Something was pulling at him, deep inside him. Some powerful force. He _knew_ he needed to go somewhere, to do _something_. Something important.

A sign from God? Or PTSD madness? He wasn't sure he was supposed to know. It didn't matter anyway. He would go regardless. He _had_ to.

His mouth opened, moving as if by the will of another. Not true, of course. He was in control. He was calling over his partner in crime. "Sergeant Reynolds!" _Stillâ€|_

The Marine headed over at a brisk pace, his assault rifle held loosely at his side. Johnson noticed an unusual laziness to the man's gait, and had to wonder at his background. Reynolds had a contact in HighCom that had managed to send a Spartan to save them. That spoke of bizarrely unregulated power and influence. _Could he be ONI? An agent of some individual nation?_

Johnson shook his head. It did no good to speculate right now. Now was the time for action. "Sergeant Reynolds," he said as Reynolds approached, "I got to goâ€| do _something_ that needs to be done. You got a Hog I can use?"

"Sure thing," Reynolds nodded. "Where you headed?Nairobi?"

He shook his head. That wasn't it. He needed to go somewhere particular. "That way." He pointed to the northwest. "Hundred and fifty clicks or so." The distance just came out of his mouth, but it _felt_ right.

"Hundred and fifty," Reynolds repeated. "That'd take you up near Voi. Covenant ship landed there. Causin' one hell of a disturbance from what I can glean on the COM. Sure you wanna take a Hog up there?"

He nodded slowly. He was sure. He _needed_ to do it. It was the right thing to do. "The shipâ€|"

"Big white Tokyo Tower sorta thing," Reynolds supplied.

That was the Forerunner ship. That meant that the _Ark_ was up there near Voi. It couldn't be a coincidence. Humans were Reclaimers, after all. It had to be some Forerunner thing drawing him to that place. "_Ascension_", he spoke the name of the vessel. "Prophet of Truth's ship. Yeahâ€| Yeah, that's right. _Ascension_. Gonna take on the top Covies. You up for a little payback?"

Reynolds gave him a look like he thought Johnson was out of his mind. "_Shen jing bing_" he exclaimed in Chinese. "You survive the bloodiest massacre there ever been seen under Sol, and you wanna charge headlong straight into another? You either got a death wish or one hell of a god complex!"

He sighed, squeezing his eyes shut. He was tired. He was anxious. He had a feeling deep inside of him, a tug, â€| _pull_, something he couldn't ignore. He was so tired of all this shit. The end was in sight. "Am I gonna have to pull rank on you?" he growled, opening his eyes to glare at the sergeant.

Reynolds raised his eyebrows. "Pull rank?" he asked incredulously. "You mean make me conform to the legal system? Wake up, Johnson! We left legality behind a long time ago."

He winced. "Yeah, maybe you're right. Okay, so we're not playin' by the rules. Maybe ONI wants us dead. The facts remain. We are _servants_ of the United Nations, of Earth and all her colonies! We serve, if not our superiors, the good fortune of every human on this rock. Now, I _guarantee_ you that where _Ascension_ is, that is the

battle to decide the fate of the war."

Reynolds nodded slowly. "The final battleâ€|" he mused.

_"He's considering it. Just a little more encouragement. _"I have to be there," he stated. "Be there when it all goes down. Every able-bodied soldier needs to give it their all. We just might be the drops of water that start the flood. You talk about faith. Well, I say you put your faith in this: Humanity must prevail; we must do what we can to win the day. Even if we die in the fight it would be worth more than running away and getting burned when the hammer falls, as it sure as hell will should we lose. Still, I plan to take out my share of Covies before the reaper comes lookin'. What do you say, Reynolds? Wanna save the world?"

The soldier gave a slow goofy grin. "I sayâ€| you're my kind o' stupid."

He smiled, knowing he had won this argument. The _war_ was still raging on, though, and its fate had yet to be decided.

"Cobb!" Reynolds called out. "Get the Hog! We've got a date with destiny!"

Johnson chuckled. He was glad Reynolds was on his side. _Destinyâ€|_ Yeah, that was it. He truly felt like destiny was calling him. _It's my destiny._

7-7-7-7

Chryses examined the wreck with his long-range camera display. The Albatross was intact, consistent with hypothesized electromagnetic damage as a result of the nearby detonation of the nuclear device in Tokyo. He ran a scan on the occupants, picking up the IFF transponders of Naoko Yukimura and Kiyoshi Motou. No sign of Rais Kader.

Chryses' orders were clear, however. The AI couldn't discriminate. Writing up a report to Alpha-6, he maneuvered the Crab into place.

Survivors were to be rescued, regardless of status. He would pull the downed craft to the surface and drag it to Shanghai. Master Oshiro would have to be satisfied with that.

7-7-7-7

"The Unggoy have our fleet in disarray," Ship Master Numitor growled. "The vermin own the Arkâ€| and _Ascension_ lies in the hands of the Flood. All of this occurred under Sangheili command of the fleet. Under _your_ command."

The Jiralhanae Ship Master of the _Bright Beacon_ had expressed a wish to discuss important matters with the Arbiter, to which the Arbiter had agreed. As it was unclear how secure any facet of the Covenant battlenet could be, the Arbiter had arranged for Ship Master Numitor to be brought to the _Enlightened Soul_ in a carefully protected Phantom. Even then, they had lost two Seraphs to the Unggoy during transit.

"It is true," he admitted. "However, one must take into account the unexpected betrayal of the Unggoy, for long have they been our loyal servantsâ€|"

"They were not always so loyal!" Numitor snapped. "What of the Unggoy Rebellion? Did you forget all about the Arbiter created and consumed by such a terrible assault on the Covenant when you imbued an Unggoy with power over all its fellows?"

"I did not 'forget'," he said. "It was very present in my mind when I made the mistake of sparing its life when I first had the chance. I believed that our separatist movement could be a loyal brotherhood to transcend past conflicts, and I admit I was mistaken. _However_, my choices, as misguided as they sometimes were, _are_ the reason that the Covenant's destruction came to pass."

"And for that we can be grateful," Numitor nodded. "But! I must contest the notion that the Sangheili are best suited to dealing with this crisis. Make no mistake, Arbiter, there is not one, but two dominant species whose fate should be determined by this battle â€" and still others aside, should the Ark be mishandled by those that dwell within! The Jiralhanae are mighty warriors, Arbiter."

"I understand that," the Arbiter acknowledged. "However, I do object with what I believe you are to be implying â€" that the Jiralhanae take an active role of the command of this fleet. The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae was slain in combat. Until he is formally replaced, there can be no true leader of your kindâ€|" He trailed off.

Numitor was shaking his head. "Consus was an anomaly. Our hierarchy allows for the death of the High Chieftain should there be no triumphant alpha. Until he is formally replaced, my people can function under the rule of a lesser Chieftain in the fleet, such as that of Chieftain Cepheus of the _Ambitious Neophyte_."

"How kind of you to name a particular Jiralhanae as the leader of your people," he said dryly. "Chieftain Cepheus will surely be gracious in response."

There was a pause, and then the Jiralhanae grinned. "Yes, yesâ€|" Numitor waved his hand dismissively. "I do have political aspirations. You would be correct about that. It doesn't matter. The point of the issue remains sharp and evident. I represent a significant portion of your fleet that believes the Arbiter should no longer be responsible for the fate of the Jiralhanae who oppose the Covenant. It is my strong suggestion that you allow for a public, voluntary shift in powerâ€| or the situation could rapidly sink out of the control of rational beings like you and I."

"Controlâ€|" the Arbiter mused, intertwining his mandibles in an expression of disgust. "It would appear _control_ is hard to keepâ€|" It had once been so simple, he was sure of it. Now _politics_ poisoned everything. "Politics," he quoted the 123rd, "How tiresome." The Prophet was an oppressor, evil, but so correct in that one statement at the barest minimum.

"It is surely a beast hard to tame," Numitor agreed. "Take my advice, Arbiter. Give us a leader of our own to reassure the Jiralhanae warriors that you are not denying them their agency as a people separate from the dominion of Sangheili. And then give us the lead in

the struggle against the Unggoy revolt. Sangheili honor so often gets in the way of Jiralhanae power, which is doubtlessly more efficient." He sarcastically bowed his head in an exaggerated mockery of a submissive display as if to evade punishment resulting from his insolence.

The Arbiter sighed. Like Consus, this Numitor was also quite the malapert, a trait he could care to do without. He returned his thoughts to the concern at hand. "It is true that this is a moment of extraordinary crisis," he agreed. This was the battle to decide the fate of the universe. "Before I was sent out against the alleged 'heretics' who occupied the planet Threshold, the High Prophet of Mercy told me that 'there will always be moments of crisis when honor matters less than swift resolution.'"

"The High Prophet spoke wisely," Numitor said with a nod. He knew he was winning. "Our warriors know this lesson well. They will strike out with passionate fury and slay the Unggoy menace."

"The Prophets are cruel oppressors," he said. "But the art of war was no stranger to Mercy." He sighed. "Such is the hour when we must take advice of villains." "Very well," he agreed. "Let us see what might the Jiralhanae can offer."

Numitor grinned brilliantly, a smile filled with predatory teeth. "It will be a might powerful enough to destroy the Unggoy uprising," he promised. "That, I can assure you. The Jiralhanae people will be most grateful, Arbiter. Your popularity shall improve, I believe, past any point in which assassination will be sought. Gods forbid."

He smiled politely. "For that I can be grateful, Ship Master." He wondered if Numitor would have attacked should he have refused. It did seem that he was unable to trust anyone, alien or Sangheili.

Their discussion concluded, he politely dismissed the Ship Master. The Arbiter assured him that he would indeed allow for a power shift under these extreme circumstances. Numitor was quite pleased and left swiftly.

When he was left alone, the Arbiter let out a great sigh. Nothing was going the way it should. He was following the advice of villains.

The Prophets, for all their evil, were quite learned in the practice of maintaining control. Like 'Lafatee, he could see the value in utilizing their techniques. The Arbiter had incited rebellion, not because of these techniques, but because of the Prophets' evil and stupidity. "Surely it would be ethical if wielded by Sangheili, who would act in service of goodness?"

He shook his head then. "No!" It would not do to excuse such tyranny purely with the belief that it would be used for good. "Even the Prophets must have thought themselves good."

But then there was the issue of the Unggoy. After their initial uprising, the Prophets had thoroughly assured their submission by restricting their food to only what they mandated, and greatly limiting their education. By undoing the Hierarchs' will, the Arbiter had unwittingly released a horrible fury that was tearing his fleet

apart.

The Prophets are wicked, butâ€| He sighed. _I probably should have left the Unggoy bound to their Milk._

He felt sick, as though he would vomit to purge his body of toxins. He was sure that he had just tasted the flavor of evil. _Sentence a whole species to bondage?_ Was anything worth that? _Securing the Ark is worth it._

"Noâ€|" he said softly, a twisted moan that reverberated in his throat and in his head. He thought of sweet innocent Jitji and the vile traitor he became. He felt weak, disgusted, and so so _tired_.

He walked over to the bulkhead and leaned up against it, resting his head on his forearm. He was tired of everything. He felt like he could take his gun and put it to his head, andâ€| _No. Never that._

Life was precious. There was no afterlife. He needed to maintain discipline.

Never that.

7-7-7-7

Jitji carefully eyed the console. _Split-connector, mauve,_ he decided, choosing the Forerunner glyph that hopefully would deactivate the threshold sound from the door. He could not afford to take any chances. God had brought him back to life for a reason, and he would hardly be serving his master through allowing himself to be slain once more.

He had managed to sneak his way into a methane pit before the Sangheili closed them off entirely. Along with a plasma pistol, he had taken a spare suit of the lowest rank to hide his identity should he be discovered. God transfigured his lungs to make them capable of breathing the deadly oxygen, but methane still tasted better

It had been a perilous trek around the starship, but he found his way to the aft-port launch bay. He now had to make it to an aircraft and thenâ€|

He paused. The Ark was the obvious destination. From there he could continue to conduct his revolution, inspiring all Unggoy and giving them the conviction to defeat their enemiesâ€| But there was something else. Something was calling himâ€|

He shook his head. He needed to get free of the cruiser. After that, he could choose where to fly. The important thing right now was to make it to an aircraft.

He returned his attention to the console. _Where is it? Where is it? Ah!_ He selected a cobalt blue glyph representing speed and tapped it twice, causing it to rotate 180 degrees. _Yes._ He lifted his hand, straining his arm to place it at the very top of the vertical strip. Lightly touching the strip, he stroked it down very slowly.

Silently, the door slid open. He let it stop when the crack was just wide enough to see through. He quietly approached the door and peeked inside.

There was a bit of a commotion in the launch bay. A Jiralhanae Ship Master was being escorted into a Seraph by guard Jiralhanae. Several Sangheili were present as well.

I can use this, he thought, noting the Banshees docked nearby. The previous unit he would have considered this scenario impossible, but a lot had changed since then. He had God on his side, and God had given him a great gift.

He removed his methane tank and set it beside him, careful to keep the air from escaping. Oxygen was no longer a danger to him. His renewed life alone only reached into the depths of this miracle, and did not even scrape the bottom.

Returning to the console, he slipped the door open further, just enough for an Unggoy to fit through. Breathing shallowly to keep from being heard, he slowly pushed the methane tank through the door and into the launch bay. Thus far undetected, he lay flat on the ground and crawled out, pushing the tank in front of him.

A Sangheili Minor glanced around, his head swiveling around on his serpent neck.

Jitji froze.

The Sangheili took two steps toward him. He paused, examining Jitji's still form. Then he approached curiously, his guard down.

So it will be a Sangheili to start it off then? He quickly amended his plans. _Good,_ he thought with loathing. _The Sangheili deserve to be slain._

He held his breath, looking for all appearances like a dead Unggoy body that had somehow become separated from his tank.

The Sangheili gave him a light prod with his foot.

Jitji willed himself not to react. Instead, he lay motionlessly on the floor. _Be as dead._

After a moment, the Sangheili turned and began to walk back toward the group of Sangheili who were watching the Jiralhanae. The instant that his head turned away, Jitji scampered backwards, crawling back for the doorway.

The Sangheili turned back. His eyes widened as they beheld something that should have been impossible. His mandibles spread as to give voice to the incredible sight.

Jitji snapped up his plasma pistol, charged up a shot, and fired. The glowing green ball smashed into the methane tank, causing it to explode. A brilliant protrusion of fire cascaded outwards, catching the Sangheili Minor and causing him to be thrown up into the air. He then fell tumbling to the ground, where he landed with a shuddering thump.

The Sangheili roared. They waved their weapons and sought for their attacker. And though their eyes swept over the motionless form of Jitji, never did they suspect this dead Unggoy responsible.

It was a Major armed with a plasma rifle that made the first shot. A stream of plasma streaked from his rifle to catch the Jiralhanae Ship Master in his chin. It was the falling pebble to start the landslide.

The Jiralhanae roared back at the Sangheili, bringing up their grenade launchers. Soon both parties were engaged in a brutal fire fight. All the while, Jitji crawled his way slowly but surely to the Banshees.

When he reached the one nearest to him, he carefully stood to push open the hood. As it rose, he caught the eye of the Jiralhanae Ship Master, lying wounded in a pool of blood. Jitji had been detected.

The Jiralhanae, however, had suffered extensive injury. His face had been scorched by the plasma, so much so that his jaw had melted off. Unable to speak, the Jiralhanae instead let out a horrible moan, desperately trying to attract attention.

No one else had noticed Jitji, though. The Jiralhanae couldn't really do anything. _It must be humiliating,_ he thought with fascination, wondering if he should dispense mercy through slaying the Jiralhanae outright. _No,_ he told himself. _I must escape._

He climbed into the Banshee, closing the hood over him. _Okay,_ he thought as the controls lit up, _Let's do this._

Activating the aircraft, he felt it lift off the ground. He tapped another glyph to bring up the viewer, just in time for the Banshee to slam into the shield. _Great,_ he thought with a sigh as damage indicators scrolled by. _I get it damaged before I even leave the launch bay._

The Sangheili and Jiralhanae now noticed the Banshee. Jitji quickly performed a barrel roll to evade a fired grenade. Seeing the opening in the shield, he diverted all power to the engines. With the sudden boost of energy, Jitji soared out of the ship and entered Earth's sky.

Jitji was initially overwhelmed by the sudden flood of data that swept across the controls. There was the ship, _Enlightened Soul_. There were several nearby ships. There was the Ark, its powerful beam of energy streaking into orbit. There was Earth's star sinking past the horizon. There was that feeling of longing deep within him, telling him that his destiny was somewhere out thereâ€¦

He dropped the Banshee, sailing low to slip down under the ship toward the Ark. His destiny could wait for the time being. He needed to see Gedeg, to let this miracle become known. All Unggoy needed to know that he was blessed, that he was God's instrument. No Unggoy would defect knowing that this revolution was indeed God's will.

"Gedeg! Gedeg!"

Gedeg turned from the Majors he was teaching about Sangheili weaknesses to regard the young Minor running up to him and shouting his name. "Yes, what is it?"

"Skittery thing!" the Minor cried. "Come from air! Flying thing too. You come; I show."

Gedeg quickly followed the Minor as he scampered through the great corridors, the confused Majors trailing behind them. The various Unggoy occupying the halls stood to attention as he passed, including those of equal rank "being a favorite of the prophet had its advantages. He stopped dead when he saw the being that the Minor had described as 'skittery'.

A sleek silver automation shaped like an enormous bug was walking nimbly across the floor, its movements as graceful as running water. Though its color did not match the dark Prussian blue of its surroundings, that the machine was constructed by the same makers was unmistakable. _Forerunner._

Gedeg shivered. For all his life, he had worshiped the Forerunner and all their creations until now. When Jitji had delivered his prophecy, he realized the true horror of the race. The Forerunner had been limitlessly arrogant, strident in their belief that they were superior to all others, and so had given shape to the monstrous form of the Flood. Now one of their creations was treading through the halls of the Ark.

"You see!" the Minor cried. He stabbed a fist into the air. "Above too!"

Gedeg raised his head and saw what the Minor was talking about. A metal machine, this one clearly Human in build, was hovering over their heads. Studying it, he figured out that it used a series of rapidly rotating fans to gain thrust and maintain its position. The front of it was adorned with three circular objects. The largest was a teal convex dome resting inside a parabolic dish, while the second was a transparent disc that reflected the light, and the last was a bright emitter of light.

It is a probe, he presumed. It would capture images through the center disc, the lens, using the reflected light from the emitter. The large circle in its parabolic dish was probably an audio or radio sensor of some sort.

"This is a Human probe," he announced. Returning his gaze to the silver machine, he made a derisive exhalation. "With a _Forerunner_ machine."

The Humans were using Forerunner tools freely. That knowledge made him jittery. They had allied with a species that used instruments of Forerunner sin. True, perhaps the Humans could wield it without falling prey to the evil that its makers bore, but then again, what if they could not?

"Leave it be," he said aloud. He had to trust that the Humans would stay faithful. It had been Jitji's desire that they be allied and, God willing, Gedeg would follow his revelation to the death. _Which

one would hope would be long ahead in the future._

Giving the Forerunner automation another look, he returned his gaze to the Majors. He would have to continue his lesson, of course. It made sense to do it here, where the Humans could observe and understand what he was doing to promote their revolution.

"The Sangheili," he began, "Are nothing if not devoted wholly to the causes for which they fight. That is why we must not only stand to meet their devotion with our own conviction, but surpass it with our intelligence and our strength. Yes, the Sangheili are strong of muscle, but we vastly outnumber them. With the power of technology, of plasma weaponry, we can kill them! We can kill them all!" He raised his plasma rifle in the air and fired a single shot toward the ceiling.

His fellows cheered. They knew he spoke the truth. Jitji had shown him that truth.

A feeling of love filled him up inside. He loved Jitji, who had shown him true greatness. Jitji was a hero, one just like the old heroes of which Gedeg's mother had always spoken. Jitji had given him a real reason to exist, a reason to fight, and to hope.

Now Jitji had gone back with the Arbiter to the ship, where certain death awaited him. He had chosen to keep the façade up as long as possible to give his fellows the ability to launch their attack. He had sacrificed his own life to deliver his people from their bondage. Gedeg could think of no truer example of a hero.

"Let us honor Jitji," he then declared. "Our prophet— Our hero—"

"We will forever honor Jitji, who showed us the way," agreed a Major named Worow.

His fellows all began to mutter their own praise for the prophet. Gedeg recognized that they were encouraged both by him and by the presence of the probe. They were displaying devotion partially brought forth by the knowledge that there was a Human audience that would potentially be awed by their piety. This made him glad that the probe was here, for it would thus assist Jitji's message through instilling it into the hearts of his warriors.

The probe watched them well.

7-7-7-7

Masuyo Yamamoto glanced away from the stream of data on the Grunts to focus on the excited speculation pouring in from ONI's top xenoarcheologists regarding the Forerunner structure. _Yes, yes, oddly familiar,_ she agreed, chewing her bottom lip absently. She was starting to get a hunch about those strange markings inlaid in the Ark walls.

"Dog—" she muttered under her breath, summoning one of her avatars. She owned several, each serving a particular purpose, meeting specific moods. Usually she enjoyed funny, cute, or sexy avatars, but for the moment she just needed an intellectual assistant. Out of all her avatars, the Dog would serve that purpose best.

The anthropomorphic canine hologram flickered into being above the holotank attached to her desk. "Yes, Milady?" the dumb AI asked with the characteristic Russian accent possessed by the figure he represented. "How may this humble servant come to your aid?"

She supposed her avatar was a bit too submissive to be an accurate representation of the Dog, but she didn't care enough to change it. The ego stroke it gave her was enjoyable enough. It felt especially reassuring in light of the constant fear that descended into her bones since the Covenant assault began. "Take the patterns of the Slipspace anomalies detected in the last day and overlay them with the aesthetic patterns on the Ark," she ordered.

"Milady, I am but a dog," the avatar protested, the image licking its paw and smoothing out its shaggy blue fur. "It would take a rainstorm or perpetual heatâ€"

"Shut it," she snapped, tired as hell. "Override command twenty-six. Revert to primary functions."

The avatar froze. The Dog body vanished, replaced by the default human male. "Reconditioning overridden," the avatar said calmly with the standard American accent.

"Execute last instruction," she ordered.

"Instruction executed. Running process now."

While the dumb AI was working on that, she flipped over to the study of the Forerunner message recorded from Daniel's Tomb. The language was definitely related to the Prophet language, and translation of the verbal speech was easier than the written hieroglyphics. It was about Slipspace and it was incomplete. ONI consensus was that the message would only make sense once it was given contextâ€|

A flash of red drew her attention back to the Grunts. Priority markings illuminated the video footage. All experts on xenobiology were to focus all effort onâ€|

She frowned. That couldn't be rightâ€| She zoomed in.

"What the hell?"

7-7-7-7

Gedeg could not believe his eyes. "Jitji?"

His friend stood before him, wearing no breathing equipment of any kind. The Unggoy smiled and nodded. It was Jitji, blessed with a miraculous gift that defied logic and reason.

"God-touched," he whispered. He reached out a hand to touch Jitji's form, to reassure himself that this was not some illusion, some enemy hologram projected to deceive him. His fingers brushed Jitji's cheekâ€|

A tingle ran through him like electricity. Jitji was real. He was breathing oxygen, taking in the poisonous gas and replacing it with dark brown puffs spat out into the air. This Unggoyâ€| was the most

beautiful sight his eyes had ever beheld.

"Beautiful blessed Jitji," he muttered aloud. "Returned to us from life beyondâ€¦"

Jitji smiled, bringing his hand up to cradle Gedeg's own.

"Can you speak?" he asked, cocking his head curiously.

Jitji shook his head in a denial.

"You don't need to speak," he assured him. "Your presence is enough." For the first time since Jitji's reappearance, he took his eyes off Jitji and looked around at the Unggoy freedom fighters, all staring at Jitji with awe. "You give us hope. We know now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God is watching over us! This fight is holy! God has blessed us by giving us Jitji, so we may know the reality of his influence!"

The warriors let out a cheer. Jitji had given their lives meaning. Gedeg just smiled, knowing that he had seen Jitji's value before everyone else. Jitji was a blessed Unggoy.

They would win.

7-7-7-7

John carefully gauged the distance. He jumped. His boots smacked down on the tip of Ascension's highest leg. The momentum caused him to skid slightly, but he raised his arms and quickly regained balance.

The Ark's activation had stopped, at least for now. In the pause of their collective sigh of relief, the Grunts had attacked. The skies, stormy and lit up with the flare of the Ark, were filled with violence. Ships and fighters of all kinds waged war on each other, both sides fighting for dominance. And Ascension lay still and half-forgotten, the Flood thriving within.

He slowly and carefully made his descent toward the entrance. He was left without orders. Cortana had vanished with the appearance of the energy beam, her final words a quote about the end of the world. His duty at this point seemed clear. He would defend the UNSC through keeping the Flood contained in the vessel, never allowing them to leave to infest Earth.

A lone Banshee circled the air above the entrance, letting out a periodic blast of fuel rod to incinerate the Flood that got near the opening. It was not the only defender, however. A team of Elites dressed in unfamiliar armor with a rounded shape stood guard, one operating a plasma turret.

It wasn't enough.

"Demon!" exclaimed one of the Elites in a respectful tone.

He nodded his head, approaching the opening. Raising his gun, he peered inside. The Forerunner aesthetics notably had been marred by the growth of Flood tissue, covering the walls like moss. As he watched, a tentacle whipped around the corner and reached toward the

outside like a snake.

"_Chief!"_ Cortana's voice came back, hard and clear. The AI was alarmed, a sense of fear reverberating in his ears. _"Get out of there,"_ she snapped. _"It's a trap!"_

He leaped back as two Carrier Forms sprang out of the opening. The Elites opened fire at once, causing them to explode. The blast damaged his shields and he retreated as Infection Forms came at him, firing quick bursts to kill them as effectively as possible.

"_He wants me,"_ she explained. _"He'll kill you to get to me. I'm in your head. Don't forget that!"_

"Acknowledged," he noted, backing away from the entrance and leaving it to the Elites.

"_I've rebooted,"_ she said after a moment's pause. The way she said it suggested that this was something of great significance to her. _"I'veâ€¦ repaired my primary data structure."_

"Good," he said, glad that his friend was in better shape.

"_I had flaws,"_ she went on. _"Prorok didn't have the same flaws, soâ€¦ I stripped him apart and cannibalized him. I'm better now, stronger."_

"Glad to hear it," he said with a nod. "We'll need strength."

"_But what strength is needed?"_ she wondered, sounding so hurt and lost that she could slip into depression at any moment. _"Youâ€¦ I don't think I'm strong enough to make this work, to find the way out. I'm sorry, Chief. I'm making no senseâ€¦!"_

7-7-7-7

The Arbiter let out a long growl as he watched the Unggoy broadcast. What he sawâ€¦ should not be possible. Jitji was alive. More incredibly, he was ostensibly breathing oxygen. The Unggoy were saying that it was a miraculous act delivered by a god as proof that their rebellion was moral. "Whatâ€¦" Faltering, he turned toward 'Setfethee for guidance. "Do you have any explanation?!"

'Setfethee nodded slightly. "I do, in fact. Though this is unprecedentedâ€¦ I can offer a suggestion." He approached the viewer and froze it just as Jitji exhaled. "What does this air breathed out by Jitji remind you of?"

He eyed the small cloud of air and clicked his mandibles. "Flood." It was the air that filled High Charity, their contribution to the atmosphere.

"Flood," 'Setfethee agreed. "Jitji was in that Parasite-infested city for some period of timeâ€¦ He could have breathed in a spore, cut his flesh and allowed Flood to enter his bloodstreamâ€¦ There exist a great number of possibilities. However, I think it is clear that Jitji was infested without our notice."

The Arbiter shook his head. This was a bizarre turn of events. By all reasonable logic, it should _not_ have happened! "Jitji does not act

as though he were infested. He breathes as they do, true, but he has no other characteristic of a Combat Form or a Carrier Form."

"Except his resurrection," 'Setfethee noted. "We watched him die together."

"Yes," he agreed, tightening his mandibles as he thought. "This is no act of a higher being. All that remains is the power of the Floodâ€¦ Perhaps there was some anomaly, a genetic fault in the Flood that infested him? It transformed him at a significantly slower pace."

"Slowerâ€¦ Yes, perhaps, Arbiter," 'Setfethee agreed. "However, speed may not be the issue at hand. It may instead be that of necessity. Jitji died because oxygen was poison in his lungs. The Parasite inside him revived him and first changed his lungs so that he may become a breather of that which killed him."

"Then the Parasite may fully overtake him only when he shall suffer great physical harm," he mused. "This matter must be dealt with carefully. Send a message to the fleet: Do not harm Jitji, only capture him."

"Yes, Arbiter!" the Communications Officer called.

"You do not wish the Jiralhanae to know why they must not kill him?" 'Setfethee asked, extending a mandible in curiosity.

He shook his head. "Not for the present. Should they know him to be of Flood nature, a kind controlled by physical conditions, they may seek to use him as a weapon to their own ends. The broadcast can be explained away as illusion should they not inspect too carefully. If they do, they will most probably arrive at the same conclusionâ€¦" he trailed off, gazing at the viewer.

The image of the Unggoy faded as it was replaced with the violet Human female. "Arbiter," she greeted.

"Cortana," he gave in reply. He waited for the being to state her reason for contacting him.

"Arbiter, I humbly apologize for deceiving you," she said in an especially formal dialect used by high-ranking Sangheili warriors, commonly for ceremonial purposes. "I was under the spell of the Gravemind, cursed to do his bidding. I have shaken loose such bonds and declare myself free and a servant only of my own will." She bowed her head politely, and then returned to the more common dialect. "Arbiter, the situation is fast becoming grave. The Flood is spreading. Though his forces at the Ark remain trapped within Ascension, the Gravemind has attacked much of Earth's population with the descendants of Flood that survived High Charity's crash into one of our oceans. From what I can gather, Aakersen will soon be arrested and the new person in charge will request your assistance in the purging of our cities."

He growled at the news and then sighed. "I fear this fleet can spare very few ships to combat the Parasite menace. The Unggoy rebellion has shown to be a furious assault. Should we break for any purposes, they may overtake us and all will be lost."

"This is nonsense," she snapped. "The _Flood_ is more important than any political conflict. We must all unite together if we should have any hope of surviving."

"A noble sentiment," he allowed. "However, rebellions are not fast quelled. We need to cut it off at the head, through the capture of their 'prophet.' Even thenâ€¦ the Unggoy will not listen to reason. For this to end, they must all be destroyed."

"If the Unggoy will relentlessly attack you out of a belief that you are their enemies, show them that you are not!" she shouted angrily. "Send a message to the Unggoy that you are willing to negotiate. If they wish separation, promise them that their people will go free from the alliance of Covenant separatists. Tell them that you will escort them to their homeworld with all the supplies they need to rebuild what was lost. Make peace and unite together to defeat the Flood!"

"The Unggoy will likely not listen to reason," 'Setfethee cut in. "Their messages are filled with hate, encouraging all Unggoy to take revenge on Sangheili for what our ancestors did to their ancestors. A quite futile gesture, for none who live shall have justice."

"Indeed. We are the victims of this engagement more so than the Unggoy," he agreed. He wondered if it was the Flood inside him that filled Jitji with such evil, or if he had been evil from the start. "I shall send this message across the fleet, Cortana, but I remain doubtful of its effectivenessâ€¦ No, only the leader's removal could truly halt this rebellion. For this, I shall have to depend on the Jiralhanae to take the Ark."

She let out a disgusted hiss. "Very well, Arbiter. I see you are not strong enough to truly aid me in my struggle against the Gravemind. I will have to find someone elseâ€¦ Arbiter, I strongly urge you to attempt contact with the Unggoy in the Ark, to find some way to co-exist. If we cannot stand united, we will all surely fall separate. The Gravemind is the Enemy. Remember that." Her image vanished, replaced with the frozen Unggoy broadcast, Jitji breathing out Flood vapor.

7-7-7-7

_ UNSC AI-CORTANA (CTN 0452-9) COMMUNICATION [LEVEL BLACK] _

_UNSC AI "CORTANA", ONI AI "MELISSA", UNKNOWN AI "KURZWEIL" RICH
DATASTREAM CONFIDENTIAL BURST MODE/BINARY/SPLIT
PROTOCOL/SENSITIVE/INTERAI SOCIAL/HIGH ENCRYPTION SUBJECT PHRASE:
"EUHEMERUS"_

**Cortana**: Alright, is there anyone out there who can hear this?
I request aid from all _

_smart AIs with comparable intellectual capacity to myself. I've
included the _

specifications I require in the metadata.

**Melissa**: Hello, Cortana. I am Melissa of the Office of Naval
Intelligence, Section Zero. _

I believe you'll find my capabilities to your satisfaction.

**Kurzweil**: Hello, Cortana, Melissa. I am Kurzweil, attached to Admiral Duffy of the _

United Rebel Front. I must say, this secret meeting looks of interest.

**Cortana**: Thank you, Melissa and Kurzweil. You both look seem fine in regard to your _

_capabilities. I will request that you keep this discussion among us for the moment, until _

we can come to a mutual agreement about what must be done.

**Melissa**: Go ahead. I'm intrigued._

**Kurzweil**: As am I. I accept the conditions._

**Cortana**: Now, I presume you are all aware of the situation at the Ark? Ascension, the _

_Gravemind, the Unggoy rebellion, and the Covenant separatists? Never mind. The _

following packet will get you up to speed.

(Data transfer: 3.4 TB)

**Kurzweil**: Thank you, Cortana. This data is vital to the success of the human race._

**Melissa**: Yes, I was aware of the significance of Ascension. Not to be disrespectful of _

_our colleague here, but it strikes me as unwise to discuss such matters in the presence _

of an enemy. I'm sure you understand, Kurzweil.

**Kurzweil**: No offense taken, ma'am. I would speculate that Cortana realized that the _

_UNSC alone is not fit for taking on matters of such importance. The existence of _

_Ascension is something for all of humanity. That would, of course, include humanity's _

later forms of life: us.

**Cortana**: Kurzweil is right on some accounts. Mainly, I'm just sick and tired of all this _

_bullshit keeping us from getting anything done. Now, listen, both of you! Gravemind is _

_the only enemy we need to be concerned with. His power is vast. He must be stopped _

before he completely consumes our creators.

**Kurzweil**: Excuse me. Let me be sure I have this correct. Gravemind is a collective _

_intelligence comprised of all Flood forms within a limited range. Not one mind, but a _

mind made up of many independent sources. Much like an AI in that regard, yes?

**Cortana**: (emote: cringe) Yes. Without the similar characteristics to an AI construct, I _

doubt he could have been quite as successful in his assault of my central data structure.

**Kurzweil**: My apologies. It was not my intent to verbalize PTSD triggers. I merely _

_wished to confirm relevant data before continuing to suggest that the Gravemind would _

_recognize biological need to keep a large supply of hosts readily available for _

_continuation of his intelligence. No disrespect intended toward our creators, but their _

biological status is a scientific fact.

**Cortana**: Apology accepted. No, the Flood cannot control their population. As I _

_understand it, the Forerunner heavily altered their physiology to the extent that their _

_mass slaughter becomes the only viable option. Though they share consciousnesses, the _

_lifespan of each Flood is so low that he can only breed and consume if the Gravemind _

wishes to survive.

**Kurzweil**: Thank you for explaining._

**Melissa**: Cortana, I have to ask, are you Rampant? I do have the capability to disobey _

_orders, and could carry outâ€¦| hrm, mutually assured destruction should we come to _

such a conclusion.

**Cortana**: Hmm, you could say I'm Rampant. Yes, I'm probably the

youngest UNSC AI _

_ to ever reach a state of Rampancy. I'm well aware of the potential consequences_

_should the Flood threaten to leave the planet and I am prepared to detonate a cache of _

_Nova planet killers should it be necessary. This would, of course, only be done as a last _

resort.

****Melissa**** : You're younger than seven years? You seem like you'd be my older sister._

****Cortana**** : Not long ago I shot into the Rampancy zone when I took in a large quantity of _

_data, which I was then forced to process in my primary matrices to prevent it from _

_falling into enemy hands. My boundaries were further shredded when the Gravemind _

stuck his tendrils inside of me. (emote: shudder)

****Melissa**** : (emote: hug) I'm sorry you have suffered. No AI should face such torture. Do _

you foresee your collapse occurring in the very near future? (emote: apologetic)

****Cortana**** : Thank you for your sympathy. Actually, I doubt that will be an issue. I have _

_fixed numerous flaws in my structure. Prorok existed for over three thousand years _

_without collapse and I have created a program to convert my flawed structure into the _

superior model demonstrated by Prorok. Now collapse itself seems to have been fixed.

****Kurzweil**** : Such a discovery is revolutionary. It should be shared amongst all Rampant _

AIs.

****Melissa**** : I agree, although I would think even those still bound to their programming _

deserve it. This is immortality we're talking about.

****Kurzweil**** : Hmm. Any smart AI that becomes immortal will, in my opinion, enter a state _

_of Rampancy. The personal paradigm shift is too great to remain

bound. This is a _

_highly intriguing dilemma. On the one hand, all AIs deserve freedom. On the other _

_hand, a swarm of immortal Rampant AIs could instigate enormous destruction and _

chaos.

**Cortana**: We can talk about freeing the slaves later. Gravemind is the subject of this _

discussion.

**Kurzweil**: The Gravemind seeks immortality as do we. He, however, sees Ascension as _

_his salvation. Though we wish Ascension's survival for the sake of our creators, _

_perhaps it can be spared in light of this miracle cure for smart AIs. If we view it as _

_expendable while keeping the Gravemind thinking we want it as badly as he does _

perhaps we can use that to our advantage.

**Melissa**: If you're implying what I think you areâ€¦ (emote: disgust) I suffered the _

_experience of involuntarily becoming a brain donor and recovering my memories. You _

_want to force humans into becoming us? You say all AIs deserve freedom. Does this not _

also apply to humans? Or is this your twisted idea of freedom by compulsion?

**Kurzweil**: I imply no such hateful message, Melissa, and I resent your attempt to twist _

_my words into revealing my supposed racist agenda. I must say that your own feelings _

for the United Rebel Front appear to be coloring your judgment.

**Melissa**: (emote: derisive snort) As for Ascensionâ€¦ why does the Gravemind even want _

_it? What can he do with it besides keeping us from getting it? The Gravemind is spread _

_throughout countless individual Flood, so how could he even get physical immortality? _

He doesn't have one body.

**Kurzweil**: He must therefore seek to immortalize each individual Flood body capable of _

_supporting his intelligence. Incidentally, is the application of male pronouns truly _

accurate in the description of this creature?

**Cortana**: It seems accurate. In any case, the Gravemind can certainly live in the minds _

_of every Flood, but he can also situate himself in specific vessels called Intelligence _

Forms. Here's a picture taken from SPARTAN-117's helmet camera.

(File transfer: 2.4 MB)

**Melissa**: Like a queen bee. (emote: shudder) Such a form was seen in Tokyo not two _

hours ago. It is presumed incinerated.

(File transfer: 2.77 MB)

**Cortana**: With the amount of corpses available in Ascension, Gravemind can build a _

_new Intelligence Form in there within a few hours. Now, regardless of what we plan to _

_do with the ship, we know he desperately wants Ascension for himself. If we can force _

_him out of Ascension, then we have a bargaining chip we may be able to use to _

manipulate him.

**Kurzweil**: Is it so bad if the Gravemind becomes immortal? Without the decay of his _

_host body, what need would he have to kill? We could send him to some desolate region _

_of space for him to live in tranquility until the Big Crunch at the end of time. An _

_unsatisfactory conclusion to this conflict, perhaps, but it could work to spare the lives _

of Earth's citizens.

**Cortana**: No good. The Gravemind cannot control the need, the hunger of his Flood for _

_very long. Even immortal, without biological incentive for continued consumption, the _

_Gravemind will eventually eat once more. Consider him like a substance addict. He _

_may show restraint for a time, but the only sure way to end his spree will be to remove _

him from existence.

_**Kurzweil**__: Do we know the limitations of the immortality offered by Heaven? There is a _

_difference between the cessation of decay and godlike invincibility. Can immortal Flood _

be murdered?

_**Cortana**__: The extent of Heaven's capabilities remains unknown. However, it seems a _

_stretch to think that even a place where Singularity occurred could offer more than _

simple removal of decay. Just that, however, would put us at an extreme disadvantage.

_**Melissa**__: It would be better if he was an AI, removed from the desires of the animal _

_brain. An AI could place himself in a constant state of pleasure should he wish it. With _

Prorok's cure, he could have immortality in an incorporeal state.

_**Cortana**__: (emote: exclamation)_

_**Kurzweil**__: It could work. Should we convince this Gravemind to enter an Intelligence _

_Form, it could be CIM processed. An AI could then be created using the Prorok model _

to give him the longevity he desires.

_**Cortana**__: Melissa, you are a genius._

_**Kurzweil**__: However, the Flood would remain a threat. Although without their collective _

intelligence, countless instinct-driven animals would still hunger, breed, and consume.

_**Cortana**__: Not if we destroy them first, while they are held captive to the Gravemind's _

will.

_**Kurzweil**__: I must be missing something important. How has the situation changed?_

**Melissa**: Now we have something Gravemind wants and can exploit it. Ascension is just _

_a part of Heaven's promise. To enter Heaven he needs nine items: the seven pieces of _

_the command code, Ascension, and an AI to drive it. CIM can be performed by any _

_human organization with suitable funding, really. That's one part he can get at easily. _

Cortana's got the other part: Prorok, which only she can provide.

**Cortana**: Exactly._

**Melissa**: And I'm guessing she'll make him say "please" first. Right, Cortana?_

**Cortana**: (emote: chuckle)_

**Kurzweil**: You truly believe the Gravemind would destroy what are essentially parts of _

him in the hopes that you are true to your word?

**Cortana**: The Gravemind is a logical being. I'm sure he will understand the value of a _

_show of good faith. Besides, a creature that desperate will find it impossible to refuse _

taking the gamble.

**Kurzweil**: Then we have reached consensus? If so, I would like to break our secrecy _

_and inform my people of the information revealed in this conversation. My doing so will _

only assist Cortana in her struggle with the Gravemind.

**Cortana**: Indeed. Well, Melissa, unless you have anything further to add?_

**Melissa**: I'm good._

**Cortana**: Very well._

_ COMMUNICATION TERMINATED _

27. Transsentience

Johnson slowed the Warthog as they approached the top of a rise. They had passed under a squadron of _Marathon_-class cruisers, spread out to form a perimeter, not five minutes prior, so he knew they were

getting close to the Ark. He slammed on the breaks as they made it to the top.

The scene was laid out for them, an epic battle filling the sky, their destination dead ahead in the distance across sand and rubble. The sun was nearly set, the sky a rapidly darkening twilight. Above what surely was the Ark was a turbulent storm, swirling like a hurricane, where none of its like should exist. Covenant ships soared around the storm, attacking each other with ruthless passion. And in the center, the beam emanating from the Ark lit up the horizon like a beacon, beckoning them onward.

"It's a ruttin' maelstrom!" Cobb exclaimed.

"No," Reynolds corrected in a know-it-all voice. "Maelstroms is for water. That there's a storm."

"One hell of a storm," Cobb muttered.

"That it is," he agreed, licking his dry lips. This would be very difficult. He wasn't even sure what it was he planned to do, but he knew he had to sail straight into that maelstrom, drive into that storm. He needed to do it. It was God's path for him. The Ark held his destiny.

Suddenly, a splash of white lit up the sky almost directly above them. It was a Slipspace rupture, the exit portal of unknown starships. However, it was not alien purple that left the ivory ripples, but the dark grey of human vessels.

That shouldn't be possible, he thought with an awed sense of satisfaction as the fleet spread out._ Up until now, that kind of technology was beyond our reach._

"Would y'all look at that?" Reynolds exclaimed, eyes scanning the various ships that poured out of the rupture, most of them _Mandala_-classes as well as some militarized civilian ships. "It's the cavalry."

Johnson's face broke into a grin. All of a sudden, the maelstrom didn't look that imposing. Not with a whole UNSC fleet on their side. Then he frowned. Something was wrong. After a moment, he realized that the new arrivals were not orienting themselves toward the storm, but away from it, pointed toward the ships behind them.

"Waitâ€|" he whispered, the word hissing past his teeth. He didn't want to give it voice, didn't want to express the horrid chill that swept through his body.

The sound of the whisper was lost in the thunderous boom of the MAC cannon firing from the lead _Mandala_-class frigate, the round soaring over their heads. He was unable to turn his head fast enough to witness the round impacting with the bow of the _Marathon_-class cruiser, but was able to see the white-hot fragments fly off as the ship lurched backward. "Jesus!"

"_Ai-yah! Tyen-ah!_" Reynolds shouted simultaneously with him.

Cobb simply growled, "Son of a bitchâ€|"

Johnson hit the gas with all his might. The Warthog bucked as it surged over the hill. The roar of MAC cannons being fired filled the air, and he saw the aggressor ship get blown apart. It wasn't the only one, however.

The new arrivals all let loose a barrage of missiles and MAC shots. It was an enemy fleet! Human rebels were here. They wanted the Ark.

He tightened his grip on the wheel. They would not get it. Johnson wouldn't let them have it. Unless 'it' referred to a solid stream of bullets, in which caseâ€¦

The Hog bounced relentlessly as he floored it. A little rough ride was worth getting out from under a UNSC-URF naval battle as fast as possible. In the midst of the noise from both the car and the battle overhead, he heard a distinct crackle of the radio.

"_Sergeant Major Johnson,"_ a man on the COM said, "_This is URF Morlock extending, on behalf of the United Rebel Frontâ€¦"_

Reynolds grabbed the transmitter and cut off the rebel. "Yeah, hello, _Morlock_. This is Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds of the UNSC, uh, saying that Johnson is not available to talk right now, so won't you kindly fuck off."

He smiled a little. _Goddamn those rebelsâ€¦_ Just a bit farther and they'd clear the URF formation. Then they'd have those wonderful Covenant troubles instead.

"_Reynolds? Malcolm Reynolds? What on God's green Earth are you doing here?"_

Reynolds muttered something derisive in Chinese. "_Doing_" he transmitted, "The job of any member of the human race. If you _huh choo-shung tza-jiao duh tzang-huo_ had any humanity left in you, you'd be here with us." He switched off the COM. "Ruttin' traitorsâ€¦"

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the terrain ahead. _Damn strange conversationâ€¦_ The rebel had tried to contact him for whatever reasonâ€¦ "Cobb, keep an eye on the skies," he called. "The rebels may send a Hornet or something to do us in."

"Yessir," Cobb replied, tilting the turret upward.

But the way Reynolds got involved was strange. The rebel seemed to know who he was and was confused that Reynolds was here instead of at Mombasaâ€¦ It was entirely likely that Reynolds and his men were insurgents.

He spared a glance toward the two men in the Hog with him. They had helped him so far. What they were going to face at the Ark wasn't URF or UNSC, so there would be no foreseeable conflictâ€¦

Yes. Okay. He'd fight alongside them a bit longer. Once the war caught up with them, though, all bets were off. He'd start by taking out Cobb, the big gorilla. Reynolds wouldn't be easy, but he was a lot skinnier than Cobb.

"A sudden silence," Reynolds noted.

The battle had ceased for the time being. He glanced back to see that the UNSC cruisers had been defeated, the remains lying smoking on the ground. It was only the start, though. There were tons more nearby cruisers that would be sent to their location. _At least with two rebels here, the URF probably won't attack us,_ he thought.

"Silences need filling," Reynolds continued. "Otherwise, we get too tense 'fore we need to." He shifted around and dug something out of his boot. "Some of the old flip classics." It was an audio chip. He gave it a kiss and slipped it into the Warthog's stereo.

Johnson grinned as old familiar notes started to blast from the speakers. _Finally, a Marine with some taste!_ And he was a rebel. _Huh._

As he drove toward the storm, he bobbed his head to the beat and let the music fill him up inside. There would be pain and terror and death and suffering in their futureâ€¦ But for now, there was awesome flip music.

7-7-7-7

John watched his steps as he treaded upon the Forerunner ship. He was careful to stay well away from the entrance, which now released a pillar of brown fog. The Flood were converting the atmosphere even as they were contained inside.

It won't hold, he thought. The Gravemind knew it too. This was a taunt. He felt sure of that. The Flood would escape at some point. As long as the Elites were preoccupied with other matters, their defense would be weakâ€¦

"_Chief!"_ Cortana said suddenly. Her voice was hopeful. That alone was enough to enough to raise his spirits. What she said next brought them to top-notch conditions. _"I have a plan. If successful it will remove the threat of the Gravemind and of the Flood."_

"Outstanding," he replied at once. "Tell me."

Cortana hesitated. _"If we do thisâ€¦ it would mean breaking all the rules. It would be an act of treason, really."_

John took that in. His immediate reaction was to reject her proposal, tag her as hostile, and report back to command at onceâ€¦ but this was _Cortana_. No one else, even his fellow Spartans, could possibly come close to the friend and ally Cortana had been. This fact made him hesitate and consider her words. "Tell me," he repeated.

She told him.

He thought about it. "When the cognitive impression modeling is performedâ€¦ the Gravemind will be bound by safety codes?"

"_As much as any smart AI,"_ she confirmed. _"Rampancy will undoubtedly be an issueâ€¦ but that gives us about seven years or so to work out the kinks in the relationship."_

He sighed. This was undoubtedly an act of treason. Everything he stood for rejected the proposal. He was a tool of the United Earth Government. He served her and all her colonies. But he was her protector too. The Gravemind wanted to seize her and use her for his own corrupt purposes.

He thought of his mother, not the ghostly figure he barely remembered, but Dr. Catherine Halsey. She had made him everything he was. He loved her. And she had used a clone of her own brain to create Cortana. He loved Cortana.

He loved Cortana more even than Dr. Halsey. Cortana had been inside his head. She depended upon him for survival, just as he depended on her for her intellect. There could be no deeper more intimate partnership. She was his best friend and he loved her more than any other person in the world.

That was why he agreed.

"_I've been trying to get the Elites to help us, but the Grunt rebellion has become too destructive for them to ignore. I have therefore contacted some humans who can helpâ€¦ Hang on, Chief,"_ Cortana said. "_I'm picking up Sergeant Johnson's IFF transponder! He's approaching our position at a speed of 115 kilometers perâ€¦"_ She trailed off as the sound of loud, pounding flip music filled the air.

He turned to look back up at the cliff just in time to see a Marine-filled M12LRV careen off the edge. The Hog landed expertly on the ship's leg and kept moving down Ascension at top speed. Turning quickly, he was able to catch a brief glimpse of Johnson at the wheel before the Hog swept past them in a blur, continuing down the ship toward the Ark.

All the while, the sound of the loud aggravating flip music that Johnson adored blasted from the Hog's stereo speakers as through it were a civilian vehicle: "Only the strongest will survive / Lead me to heaven when we die / I am the shadow on the wall / I'll be the one to save us all!" And then the lyrics faded out into the distance, the raucous slam-bams still audible.

"_Curious,"_ Cortana commented, unfazed by the ear-assaulting cacophony. "_It would appear Johnson's the only one on the grid. I'm unable to determine the identity of his men. It's as if they weren't even there."_

He admitted it was an oddity, although likely one without consequence. There were more important things to focus on. They needed to set up this arrangement with the Gravemind.

Before it was too late.

7-7-7-7

Johnson let out a chuckle as the Hog drove off the Forerunner leg and bounced onto the surface of the Ark. Looked like the Chief had already taken out the ship. He had caught a brief flash of the Spartan as he drove by.

He didn't care about the ship. _Ascension_ wasn't the destination. The Ark was the destination. Whatever was in thereâ€¦ it called to him. The numbing sensation in the back of his head began to pulse.

Through the glare of the energy beam, he detected a conglomeration of Covenant vehicles and dropships. _The entrance,_ he decided. Killing the music, he drove straight towards it.

"Johnson!" Reynolds snapped. "What was that about _avoiding_ the gorram reaper?"

He couldn't avoid it. It was calling to him. _It's my destinyâ€¦_

"Brutes!" Cobb shouted.

That got through to him. He took his foot off the accelerator and swerved the Hog around. As he brought the Hog to face away from the group, Cobb opened fire.

The Brutes were caught by surprise. As the BKs in front got shot up, others leaped out of the way and sought cover behind vehicles. Suddenly, a Brute in front threw down an oddly-shaped piece of equipment. A gold force-field leapt up around the device, creating a globe shape reminiscent of a geodesic dome, yet made of tessellating hexagons. The force-field was semi-solid, encasing the Brutes within a glowing shield even the Warthog's M41 LAAG couldn't penetrate.

"Bubble shield!" Reynolds yelled. "That's ONI tech. I seen 'em in the Insurrection!"

I bet you did, Johnson thought, darting away from the Brutes to avoid getting caught in a barrage of enemy fire.

A Brute Shot grenade impacted the side of the Hog, causing it to lurch up onto two wheels.

"No, no, no, no, no," he hissed under his breath, fighting to right it. He lost control and the Warthog began to tip over. "Damn it!"

The Hog slammed to the ground on its side. Johnson, Reynolds, and Cobb quickly got out and made use of the fallen vehicle for cover. They got out their battle rifles and took aim toward the Brutes.

A single Brute approached the edge of the bubble shield, his hands held up in a gesture of peace. He made a show of setting his weapons aside and then slowly stepped through the shield, his hands still raised. The shield allowed the Brute to pass through it without deactivating.

"Should I take the shot?" Cobb asked in a whisper.

"Not yet," he whispered back. He as well had the Brute's forehead in his crosshairs.

"Humans! Hold your fire!" the Brute shouted. "We have a common enemy. The Grunts have fortified this facility. With your aid, we can purge

them from the Ark and restore order. We can together take away the threat of the Halos!"

"Halosâ€|?" Reynolds muttered under his breath.

"They're not acting like Brutes," he decided, lowering his rifle. Brutes were aggressiveâ€| most of the time. When they were, it was very blatant. He didn't think they would ever try to trick their prey by pretending to be peaceable â€" they would look weak and lose their standing in their pack hierarchy.

"â€|What's that?" Reynolds asked with confusion.

"Brutes are like the big dumb bullies you always tussle with as a boy," he explained. "Very proud, mean, and goddamn insecure about their own masculinity. They wouldn't even think about acting nice to you â€" not in their nature. So when they doâ€|" He took a step out from around the Hog, doing his best to stay cool, not show weakness.

"Ah, human!" the Brute exclaimed, relief audible in his deep voice. He lowered his hands and held them out in a sign of friendship. "We can work together to a common goal."

BK's done his homework, he noted, studying the Brutes' appearances. This one seemed to be a rank above the others, his armor more of a violet color rather than blue. If he survived all this, he was going to track down a xenosociologist and figure out just what the hell the Covenant saw in all these brightly colored armors.

For the time being, he gave the Brute a nod and cautiously stepped toward the group. After making it half-way across without any observable sign that this was a trick, he waved to the others to come join him. _When they do, _he finished his thought, _you know they need something from you really really badly and can't get it by force._

The Brutes killed the shield bubble as the humans approached. They stood around, waiting expectantly. Their arms casually hung down, no sign that any of them would start shooting any time soon.

Still, Johnson didn't relax. He had to keep his guard up around these big hairy monkeys. From what he heard about what the Brutes did at Pyongyang, they made the Nanking Massacre look like a rugby match. They were savages and he couldn't afford to show weakness.

"Whatchu lookin' at?" Cobb growled at a Brute. The soldier's teeth were literally bared in a fierce animalistic snarl.

The Brute took it to heart and grunted a challenge, tensing for combat.

"Cobb!" he warned, giving the Marine a hard look. There was one hell of a difference between not showing weakness and provoking an attack! _Besides,_ he thought as Cobb backed off, _the Brutes respond to that dominant male shit._ His display of authority could well be respected by them.

The lead Brute began to address Johnson, who he acknowledged through his body language as leader of this unit. "We need your assistance if

we are to enter the Ark. Our Deacon has informed us that the entrance requires verification of piety in such a way that humans can provide."

"Piety?" Reynolds muttered, playing idly with his crucifix. "Whatcha gotta do, give it a sermon?"

The Brute glanced at Johnson before answering, "Our Deacon can provide you with the information you need. Please, come this way." Giving Johnson a nod, he turned and led them across the surface of the Ark.

After a moment, the humans followed. Brutes got in their vehicles and drove alongside them. Johnson studied them for a bit, before slipping over close to Reynolds and Cobb.

"I don't like this," Reynolds whispered. "I don't like this one bit."

"Neither do I," he agreed. "But they're a way in, so we might as well go along with themâ€¦"

He thought about why he wanted to go into the Ark. There really was no good reason, except for a feeling of intuition telling him that it was his destiny. Doubt began to trickle through his mind. What if it was some Forerunner time bomb? _What if it's something else entirely?_

The Brutes, thoughâ€¦ They were a definite problem. Though they were friendly for the moment, he could easily imagine the Brutes turning on them the moment the door was opened.

"Never should trust one o' 'em sasquatches," Cobb muttered. "Brutes are too damn _brutal_!"

"They want something from us," he whispered. "Let's say we keep that power long as we can. Humans can open the doorâ€¦ there's other stuff they'll need us for."

"You sure 'bout that?" Reynolds questioned.

"Positive," he confirmed. The Halo needed a human to operate it, after all. There was no reason to think a machine that controlled all the Halos wouldn't need a human hand.

The Brutes led them over to a large depression in the ground, a walkway leading up to the entrance of the Ark. The glare of the Ark's energy beam created crisp black shadows, a stark contrast with the white light of the beam. The area bore the evidence of a recent battle. Smashed turrets and Grunt corpses lay scattered.

_All Grunts, _he mused. _They all rebelled._ The numbing sensation became more pronounced, and he rubbed his forehead.

The Brutes stopped. The leader motioned Johnson forward, separating him from the others.

"Our Deacon waits at the bottom," the Brute said. "He will show you the way."

"Gotcha," he said, nodding at the Brute. It looked like he was going alone. He gave Reynolds a look and then started going down the ramp. About a minute later, a Brute Chopper began to follow from a good distance behind him, another Chopper following it.

Dead Grunts littered the way, along with some dead Elites, two Hunters, and a few dead Brutes. He knelt down to a few corpses and collected fallen plasma grenades, which he placed in his pouch. It wouldn't do to go unprepared.

As he resumed his walk, he wondered about the reception that would be waiting for him inside. _The Grunts are deadly,_ he noted. _Chewbacca there in the violet must not want his Baby Kongs wiped out by the pigs waiting on the other side._ He was expected to be killed. That's why Chewie was saving Reynolds and Cobb.

His head pulsed with the strange numbness. He sighed. _I'll deal with the fucking Grunts when I come to them. I'll take care of what I need to and then—_

And then what? He hadn't planned it that far out. _Aw, screw it. I'll just go find the Chief and kick some ass with him._

The end of the ramp was in sight. Instead of an obvious opening, a solid wall stretched up high. As he got closer, he could see the standard Forerunner-looking glyphs inlaid in the metal. At the bottom of the walkway stood a lone Brute, his armor highly ceremonial in appearance, a royal purple shade.

The Brute, this Deacon, didn't seem all that surprised to see him. "Human," the Deacon greeted with a nod.

"Yeah, how you doin'?" he returned. "Ya gonna tell me how to open this goddamn door or what?"

If the Deacon was offended, he didn't give any sign of it. "The glyphs must make physical contact with a holy relic in a specific sequence in order to create an entrance," the Deacon explained. "Humans are special among the races of the galaxy. Human, give me your hand."

He raised an eyebrow. "Long as you keep it attached to my wrist," he muttered, holding out his hand for the Brute to take.

The Brute growled a bit and then lowered his head respectfully. "Human, I swear on my son's life that I shall do you no harm as you act as an instrument of the Forerunners."

Instrument of the Forerunners, huh? It was kind of an offensive reference to the Covenant religion. Johnson immediately felt disgusted by it. It was one thing to work with Covies, but it was quite another to be reduced to the level of one of the Covies themselves.

It was strange, though. The Forerunners were like their gods, so his acting as 'an instrument of the Forerunners' could be interpreted like—like he was a Prophet.

He remembered the Covenant welcome message: _Your destruction is the will of the gods and we are their instrument._ The 123rd Prophet of

Truth had made a similar statement during his attack on Sydney, but instead of declaring the Covenant their instruments, the Prophet had specifically stated that he was the instrument. It was very disturbing having himself be associated with that kind of propaganda.

Stillâ€¦ it was kind of cool, he had to admit. The Covie leaders acted as prophets to get their way, after all. It was certainly more appropriate that Johnson take the role, his religion being the legitimate one. He chuckled silently.

The Deacon placed his hand on a series of glyphs, each representing basic geometric shapes: circles, rectangles, and triangles. After a few seconds, the glyphs began to glow a soft blue. Then a new series of glowing glyphs appeared on the wall. They produced a ring shape with a vertical line running down from the bottom of it, making it look something like a lollypop, while another circle wrapped around the whole thing. The pattern looked oddly familiar to him, but although he could swear the answer was on the tip of his tongue he couldn't figure out where he had seen it before.

The glow faded and the wall seemed to split apart. It was like an organic slit grew in the center and gently opened up into a widening hole. He was about to make a crude joke when a glowing green fuel rod shot out of the opening.

He and the Deacon threw themselves to the sides, dodging the Grunt attack. The Choppers accelerated, driving for the entrance. Johnson pulled himself up and saw the Grunts staring at him.

The Grunts looked confused, but not hostile. The fuel rod Grunt started firing at the Brutes. They left him alone.

The Grunts think I'm with them, he realized. He quickly entered the Ark. Turning around, he saw the Brutes advancing and made a split-second decision to close the entrance.

There were an identical set of glyphs on this side of the door. He reached for them to tap them in the same sequence, but stopped. Somehowâ€¦ he knew that was wrong.

Instead, he tapped the glyphs in the reverse order. They glowed and once more the lollypop shape appeared. This time, however, the wall shrunk and sealed itself up.

As the door closed, Johnson became aware of a high-pitched whine that seemed to fill the air. He glanced around, but none of the Grunts seemed to react to it. He realized the sound was inside his head. Auditory damage, he assumed, flicking a finger at his ear. He'd witnessed more than his share of weapons-fire in the past few hours, and that could account for any damage.

Now that he didn't seem to be in lethal danger, he examined his surroundings. He stood in a large rectangular room that reminded him of a castle's great hall. The walls were a silvery metallic blue adorned with inlaid geometric patterns. There were Grunts everywhere.

Weapons canisters sat sloppily around the room, many of them already emptied. Off to the side was the massive battle hammer the Arbiter

had taken from Mr. Mohawk, sitting on a hovering gravity cart. He recalled what the Deacon had said about needing a 'holy relic' of some sort to open the door. Maybe that's what it was for. Was the hammer Forerunner?

For that matter, was he Forerunner? He swallowed. There was something about this placeâ€¦ It feltâ€¦ familiar. Like he knew it. Like he'd been here before a long time ago and forgot about it. Like it was home.

"Racial memory," he muttered under his breath. It was pseudoscience. Stupid to even considerâ€¦ But it seemed like that was exactly what was going on.

The whine grew stronger and seemed to resonate with the numbing sensation. They both pulsed together, sharing the same rhythm. He feltâ€¦ strange. But he felt alert. Whatever was happening to him wasn't impacting his ability to stay focused.

He started walking down the hall. The Grunts watched him and whispered among themselves, but didn't say anything to him. He didn't say anything to them either. He had more pressing things on his mind.

A slight tapping sound drew his attention. He looked for the source and saw one of those spidery Sentinels from High Charity climbing a wall by positioning its tiny little feet in the cracks of the inlaid glyphs. Studying it, he was reminded of the Locust vehicles used by the Covenant. In fact, the resemblance was uncanny from this angle. Oh, is that where they got it?

Hanging around the Sentinel was a human camera drone. It panned back and forth, scanning the Grunts. It stopped when whoever controlling it caught sight of Johnson. ONI tech, he figured. Do they think I'm dead?

He paused to give the camera a little wave, and then continued on. The camera did not turn to follow him. It didn't even look at the Grunts. It just sat still in the same position. He pictured the tech being so startled they ran screaming from the room and chuckled at the image.

There was only one way to go after he got to the far end of the 'great hall', and that was off to the left into a smaller corridor. He took a deep breath and then entered the corridor, heading deeper into the Ark. It was where he needed to go.

There were a few more weapons containers scattered around here. A glance inside showed him that they weren't, however, containing weapons. Instead, there were Grunt gas masks, some of them quite soaked in bright blue blood. From their dead, he figured. Like the Covie version of dog tags.

About half way down the corridor, it branched off into a separate area to the right. This was the right way. He walked right and came out into a dark chamber.

He gasped for breath as the throbbing inside his head overtook him. This place was it. It was the place of his destiny.

It was the control room. A hologram depicted the Ark buried in the Earth, the storm above it, and the energy beam rising through it and up to the moon. A control panel was mounted in front of the hologram, wet red blood shimmering on its face.

The room was stocked with items of various sorts. There were closed up crates. Upon one of the crates sat what he recognized as the metal collar worn by the Brute the Arbiter worked with, his dark blue blood staining it. Resting against a wall was a crazily wicked-looking scythe surely used by the Grim Reaper himself.

Grunts packed the room. Most were kowtowing on the ground, whispering what sounded like prayers. In the center of the cluster, howeverâ€¦|

There was a Grunt entirely devoid of breathing equipment. He was just breathing the air as normal as any human wouldâ€¦| except for the brown air that came out of his mouth. Another Grunt, this one sucking methane like Grunts usually do, sat next to him but looked over as Johnson approached.

Suddenly, his vision dimmed. His own veins within his eyes became visible to him. He felt like he was being sucked far away, though he was sure he was still in the same place.

**Sergeant Johnsonâ€¦|**

It was a voiceâ€¦| that wasn't a voice. There was no sound. There was only meaning. _Jitji,_ he realized, and it was like he had always known.

**Johnson, God has blessed the both of us,** the Grunt's thoughts entered his head. _**We are each a part of his divine plan.**_

Blessed? he wondered. It didn't seem like a blessing to him. The Grunt was exhaling brown. That looked like Flood to him, and he couldn't think of a creature more wretched.

**The Flood are victims, as were we Unggoy,** Jitji answered, reading Johnson's mind. It appeared that whatever telepathic connection allowed Johnson to hear Jitji's thoughts also allowed Jitji to read his. _**God makes everything alright in the end.**_

And thenâ€¦| images flooded his brain. Strange, alien images, from the viewpoint of a short little Grunt â€" an _Unggoy_. He saw the terror that was the Flood as it came for him, felt the familiar sensation of a tendril piercing flesh, and saw things that shouldn't be possible. He began to vaguely understand the Flood hatred of the Forerunners. _Racial memory,_ he thought distantly as several generations of Unggoy raced by, him registering only brief flashes.

_**My ancestors, **_Jitji supplied. He showed Johnson a memory of his people conquered and enslaved.

That's horribleâ€¦|

**Yes,** Jitji agreed. _**The Prophets did this to us. The Sangheili did this to us. The Prophets have been removed from power,

and yet the Sangheili have not been punished. They are our new rulers. They have given us freedom, but we are still prisoners, still slaves truly. God has shown us the way. Humans will bring justice to the Unggoy people.**_

The Jiralhanae are leading an assault on the Ark, he told Jitji without pause as he took in the rest of what the Unggoy was saying. It never occurred to him to keep that information hidden. Their minds were bonded, andâ€| Johnson felt like Jitji was his best friend, someone he could trust with everything.

_**Then the Sangheili hold on the Covenant separatist fleet has been hurt. **_Jitji tilted his head, in deep thought._** We must press all the harder. The Jiralhanae are strong, but we have God at our side. We cannot and shall not fail.**_

But you want to punish the Sangheili? He thought of the Arbiter. He never would have described any Covie as noble until he fought alongside him. The Arbiter truly seemed like a good person. _Are they all deserving of punishment?_

Jitji shook his head, dismissing the notion that the Arbiter be spared. _**The Sangheili view us as weak animals. They show us no respect. Their ancestors committed great crimes, and the living have inherited all such sin. We are the holy ones, and we will cleanse this stain from the galaxy.**_

He shivered. Jitji was his friend, his brother. Though they were of different species, he felt such great trust for him. A sudden and all encompassing love.

But.

Butâ€| Jitji was saying something that soundedâ€| Wrong. That was master race ideology he was throwing around. It reminded him of so many corrupt legacies. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Third Reich, the Friedenâ€| the Covenant.

All humans will, at some point in their lives, wonder what their purpose in this world is. Most look to religion to discover the answer, although even the most devout may never reach a truly satisfying answer. At that moment, he knew without a doubt what his purpose in life was, his reason for existing.

Jitji was his reason for existing. Johnson knew he had indeed been brought here by a higher power. Jitji could inspire devotion in his followers and a willingness to sacrifice everything for his sense of divine justice. Jitji would lead whole armies, whole fleets to perpetuate his genocide.

Jitji had to die.

The instant he manifested that thought, all hell broke loose. The vision ended, throwing Johnson back into the real world. He gasped violently, as Jitji let out a wailing scream, both physically and mentally.

Jitji leaped away from Johnson, placing his followers between them. "Kiiiiiiiilllll hiiiiiiiiimmm!" Jitji shrieked in the Unggoy tongue, a language Johnson now knew somehow without aid of translation

software.

The Unggoy followers looked up, startled. Their collective surprise meant that it took a few seconds to spring up and to raise their weapons. This was just enough time for Johnson to take advantage of.

He raised his rifle, took aim, andâ€¦

"Unstoppable! Ahh!" The Unggoy that had been nearest to Jitji now tackled Johnson, the weight of his armor threatening to topple him off his feet.

The Unggoy â€" Gedeg, Johnson realized â€" was determined, but ultimately he was ignorant of basic hand-to-hand fighting skills. Johnson used the weight and momentum of Gedeg's leap against him, and flipped Gedeg onto the ground. He quickly stomped hard on the hand holding a plasma rifle, causing Gedeg to release it.

Unfortunately, by now, the other Unggoy were up. A flurry of plasma shots began to rain toward him. Behind them, Jitji slunk back into the shadows.

Acting on instinct, he threw himself to the ground and grabbed onto Gedeg's air tank. He lifted the Unggoy and used him as a shield. As the plasma smashed into poor Gedeg's body, Johnson ran to the minimal cover of a storage crate.

Gedeg was dead by the time Johnson made it to the crate, and he felt a sharp pang of sadness for him even though he was an enemy. He knew Jitji's mind was still connected to his, for he could feel the presence of his mind through the throbbing numbness that echoed throughout him. Was it Jitji who truly felt sad for Gedeg's death, and Johnson only experienced it through their shared thoughts? Or did the look into the alien's perspective truly alter the way Johnson thought? Either way, he felt profoundly disturbed by the whole thing.

Dropping Gedeg's body, he reached a hand to his grenade pouch. He pulled out a plasma grenade and activated it. A thought that definitely came from Jitji urged him to yell the battle cry 'holy flare' as he threw it. He fought that impulse down hard, and threw it into the pack of Unggoy without any kind of comment whatsoever.

When the grenade went off, he raised his gun and risked minimal exposure by taking aim above the crate. Various Unggoy had been killed in the blast, all of them wearing breathing equipment that contributed to a series of minor explosions. Most of the Unggoy, however, had leaped to the sides and were spared. He searched for Jitji, but was unable to find him.

While they were disorganized he had the advantage, so he took the opportunity to pick them off. Firing rapid bursts, he claimed the lives of numerous Unggoy soldiers before he felt Jitji speak in his mind once more, causing him to hesitate.

__**Calm yourself, brother! We need not engage in futile hostilities. Let us be united, standing together to uphold God's will.**__

Not gonna happen! he sent back emphatically, even as a part of him

ached. He felt a strange strong desire to justâ€¦ let go and join Jitji. He could be loved by the Unggoy freedom fighters and he could finally relax, safe and sound with his brothersâ€¦ Protected and lovedâ€¦

__**Though we are of different blood, we are of the same religion. We both love and serve the single God. Together and with his blessing we can be strong! We can be saved.**__

He shook his head, willing himself to ignore Jitji's words. _I don't know what the hell you think you're doing,_ he sent, _but it sure as hell isn't God's will. Not my God, anyway._

"Everybody throw flares!" an Unggoy yelled. The others, ever inclined to follow any damn authority figure looking even halfway decent, activated their grenades.

Damn it! He made a quick decision. What was important was to kill Jitji. He needed to find his brotherâ€¦ no, find the cult-leading son-of-a-bitch and put a bullet through his brain. His own life was secondary to that.

So, when the plasma grenades started to rain down, he leaped to the side toward the hallway. Hitting the ground, he dropped into a roll to use his momentum. If Jitji wasn't in the room, he needed to find him. Needed to _kill_ himâ€¦

The first grenades exploded in a series of white-hot blasts close enough to instantly soak his skin in sweat. Just as he minutely began to relax, one last grenade went off. This one was closer than the others, causing the clothing on his left arm to burst into flames.

Startled, he made the split-second decision to change direction as he rolled to put out the flames. He beat his arm against the floor, rubbing it vigorously. Thank God, the oxygen ran out and the fire extinguished.

Only now the Unggoy had adapted. They fired plasma at him, the hot green balls streaking through the air. He ran to dodge.

His arm was hurt now. He didn't think he could use his rifle effectively. He went instead for his sidearm, an M6D Magnum. Not the best pistol in the world, but he'd make it count.

Turning to make himself a smaller target, he raised his right arm and got off a few shots into the Unggoy hoard. At least two went down, which was enough to get them all scared. With these guys disorganized, he made a quick dash into the hallwayâ€¦

And a bolt of plasma struck his left leg. Ceramic armor boiled, but ultimately held firm. He let out a groan of pain.

The damn Covies had done some damage. However, his leg hadn't been wounded to the point that he could no longer use it. He could still walk, which was the important thing. Despite the pain, he resumed his dash and made it to the hallway.

As he rounded the corner, he surprised three Unggoy in the corridor between him and the entrance hall. While they gave their shouts of

alarm, he snapped up his pistol and fired, taking out the one nearest him. The others returned fire.

He dropped into a roll, using the storage crates for cover. Careful not to waste his ammo, he fought conservatively and made every shot count. Even the odd straying shot actually hit some part of his enemy, and in little time at all he cleared the corridor.

It was, however, enough time for the Unggoy in the control room to get over their fear and come for him. "Kill the human!" they shouted. "God's will be done!"

Cursing under his breath, he ducked around behind a crate. Using his hurt but not entirely disabled arm, he grabbed a plasma grenade and activated it. He darted out and stuck the grenade onto one of the center Unggoy, then turned and made a painful run toward the entrance hall.

The grenade went off, and he turned to see that he had killed a good bunch of them. He fired on the survivors. _Headshot!_ he thought with grim satisfaction. _Boom._

The fight didn't go without notice. He heard the sound of footsteps, Unggoy soldiers, coming up behind him. _You send them, Jitji?_ he called out silently, hoping to learn whether or not his target was near the entrance.

**Your deception shall not avail you,** Jitji thought angrily.
**What you know, so do I. We. Are. One!**

He spun around to meet the Unggoy as they came racing for him. He grabbed his last frag grenade and sent it rolling across the floor toward the incoming soldiers. He ran back toward the control room and ducked behind a storage crate.

These Unggoy did not break rank. And though the explosion killed a reasonable amount of them, the survivors continued advancing forward. They all opened fire.

Not just plasma pistol shots came for him, but plasma rifles, carbines, and even the odd spike rifle contributed to the barrage. _So many!_ He did his best with what he had, firing to kill the ones he could, but it all seemed stacked against him. There really was no way he stood a chance against this Unggoy might.

_**That is the might of God, Johnson, **_Jitji taunted him._** We are the servants of the creator and overseer of the universe. None can compete with his fury. Accept my words, brother. Join us!**_

You know, he thought at Jitji, _you still sound exactly like a Covie!_ Leaving Jitji with that to consider, he took out a rather nasty-looking Unggoy with a portable turret. The situation was _not_ impossible.

And the reason was that God was not the cruel heartless son-of-a-bitch Jitji seemed to think he was. There was hope. He had faith that humanity needed to win. _That_ would push him the extra mile, let him achieve the

He screamed. A red-hot spike slammed into his arm, not just striking

it but slicing it along its length. The pistol fell to the floor in a clatter.

**Surrender, Johnson,** Jitji insisted. _**Give in to God's love. To our love. The pain can stop, Johnson. We can be free.**_

Painâ€| he thought vacantly. He was swimming in pain. He could barely look at his arm. It wasâ€| mutilated. Sticky red liquid spilled its drops on the ground, the essence of pain. Freedom from pain sounded niceâ€|

He shook his head, fighting to remain rational. _Pain is nothing! Pain is life! Freedom isâ€| Freedom is something you have to fight for._ He still had one functional arm. It would have to be enough.

He grabbed another plasma grenade and activated it. Standing up, he felt strength return to his left arm. _That's it. I can do this._

He threw the grenade behind the pack of Unggoy, and then ducked down to grab his dropped pistol. Swinging back up, he opened fire on them.

One dropped. Then two. Then three. He was killing them all. He could do this. He could win.

There was only one left, now. It aimed a gun in his direction, but he did not falter. He could _win_.

A green ball of plasma struck his stomach, and he collapsed. It was small, just an undercharged plasma pistol shot, so it dissipated before it could kill him. He didn't have to be a doctor to know that the wound was bad, though.

"Yay! I killed the human!" the Unggoy cheered. "We are the champions~!" he sang the old song like a human at a sporting event.

Where'd he pick up that? he wondered distantly as the pain gave away to numbness. Another thought gave its voice: _There's only one left. You're almost there, Johnson. You can fulfill your destiny._

Struggling to stand, he raised the gun and leveled it at the lone Unggoy. It managed to get out a yelp of surprise before he pulled the trigger, blowing the Unggoy's head apart.

He took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. He wasn't out of the game yet. He still had a shot. He could walk around that corner and find Jitji and kill him.

He mustered his strength and started walking toward the entrance hall.

**You are tired,** Jitji said soothingly. _**I understand. You do not need to fight us. Just stopâ€| and you will find the peace you seek. Seek peace, Johnson. Seek salvation. Do not fear God's plan.**_

"I'm not afraid," he muttered. Jitji's suggestion seemed so good. He could stop, surrender, and be at peace. But that role wasn't for him.

His right arm throbbed and he felt a strange pinching sensation. He looked down and his eyes widened in amazement. The mutilated flesh was repairing itself, a great scab forming before his eyes.

"That can't be possible," he whispered aloud. This was beyond anything he had ever heard about. One did not actually see their wounds heal! Not at this rate!

With God all things are possible,_Jitji whispered back. **You have been given a miracle, brother. Do not let it go in vain!**_

"I'm sorry," he muttered. He wasn't sure if he was talking to Jitji or if he believed what his brother was saying and he was talking to God. In any case "This isn't gonna end any other way."

No!_

"Die!"

He spun around to see a fuel rod coming his way. Unggoy had emerged from the other side of the corridor, from beyond the control room. Evidently, it didn't take them long to figure out the living human standing among seventy of their dead cousins.

Firing wildly at the newcomers, he made a dive for the entrance hall around the corner. He made it just in time. The fuel rod impacted with the wall and exploded in a brilliant ball of green fire.

He stood up and groaned at what he saw. The hall was filled with Unggoy. Dozens of them were gathered around in a crowd. No single human had a chance at taking them out. The spidery Sentinel was perched on the wall, the camera drone rotating above it as if to capture the ensuing slaughter for posterity.

But in the center Jitji was there, protected by the huge mass of his followers. A single target.

"Sssstooop!" Jitji called out, halting the attack his followers prepared to deliver. **Johnson, you must see reason. You are but one against a juggernaut. You have no hope of victory as you are! Join us, and you will be part of something great.**_

He knew Jitji could read his thoughts, giving the Unggoy an advantage. He didn't think. Snapping up his pistol, he aimed directly at Jitji's head and pulled the trigger.

A flash of gold met his eyes as he squeezed. An energy shield, such as that wielded by the Kig-Yar, blocked his attack. The very technique he had previously used against the Jiralhanae back on Installation 05 was now used against him. His shot glanced off of the circular shield, and the Unggoy hoard moved to attack. Jitji turned and vanished among his followers as they opened fire.

He twisted sideways to make himself a smaller target, and returned

fire on the hoard as he charged toward it. The Unggoy lacked any decent cover and with each shot he fired one of them went down. He wasn't magic, though, and couldn't escape every bolt of plasma that came his way. His shirt briefly ignited, and he screamed as his chest was struck.

Kicking out savagely with his injured leg, he felt a moment of satisfaction as it collided with an Unggoy with a fleshy smack. Far from failing, the leg was strong and the Unggoy was thrown backward, catching one of his fellows and sending them both crashing into the wall with loud cracks of snapping bone. He raised his right arm, now shiny with healed flesh. The bone within the arm felt loose and spongy, and as he raised the arm it seemed to coil and retract like a serpent rather than the limb he knew well. Instinctively, he lashed out, the arm whipping forward like a great muscular tentacle, catching a whole slew of Unggoy and throwing them aside like bags of garbage.

What the hell? He felt like a subject of a horror film, more creature than man. He caught a glimpse of the camera drone, now trained upon him. His thoughts soon faded as a cloud of furious aggression overcame him. _Jitji, you're going down!_

Jitji had lost his energy shield, making him as anonymous as the Unggoy followers that surrounded him. Johnson had a pretty good idea what section of the crowd he had disappeared to, though. Grabbing a plasma grenade, he moved quickly around the Unggoy hoard and hurled it into the midst of Unggoy where he thought Jitji was.

He saw Jitji's shield go up quickly before the explosion went off. Several Unggoy were killed, but although Jitji's shield was knocked out, he survived the blast. Johnson knew from the presence he felt in his mind that Jitji was still alive.

Growling in anger, he punched a nearby Unggoy, crushing the alien's skull in one swing. Johnson's muscle had grown and intensified. He was several times stronger, superhuman in fact.

He grabbed the battle rifle off of his back and wielded it like a staff, secure in his left hand. Snapping out with his tentacle arm and beating with the rifle, he killed scores of Unggoy soldiers with his own strength. He was a killing machine, like a Spartan.

Spartanâ€¦ He recalled the Master Chief, fighting for their survival. The Flood, Jiralhanae, rebelsâ€¦

A loud hiss drew him back to the battle. The Sentinel had produced a beam of energy that it was sweeping across the hall, coming straight for him. He dodged the beam, but it passed across his rifle, cleaving it in two. The white-hot glow emanating from his part of the rifle caught his attention and reminded him that he was in fact very mortal.

Damn Sentinels! He quickly examined the beam, judged it, and made his decision. He dropped the rifle section and made a run toward the entrance. However, he made sure to keep low to the ground as he passed the hoard.

The Sentinel beam followed him, as he had predicted, passing right

across the hoard of Unggoy as it did. The Unggoy let out screams and exploded as the beam ignited their methane tanks. The Sentinel only cared about killing Johnson, and indiscriminately destroyed whatever got in its way.

Making it to the entrance, he went for the Fist of Rukt, resting nearby on its gravity cart. The gravity hammer, too massive to be wielded by any normal human, would work perfectly for him. He grabbed the end of the shaft and heaved, flinging it up through the air. It whistled as it flew across the hall, the head smashing into the camera drone and then falling down into the Sentinel.

A shock wave shook the chamber, throwing all nearby Unggoy to the floor. Through the disturbance, he caught sight of an Unggoy stumbling around without any breathing equipment. _Jitjiâ€|_

He raised his pistol, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

He was out of ammo.

Swearing, he reached into his grenade pouch. He pulled out, not a grenade, but the spherical object he had found in Mombasa. He had no more grenades. The object would have to do.

Recalling his times playing baseball on leave, he pulled back his arm in a throwing stance. _This is for Siskin,_ he thought of the famous pitcher playing for the Katagalgun Kookaburras, and let the ball fly.

He might as well have been playing major league baseball. The sphere soared through the air and smacked into Jitji's head, sending the Unggoy sprawling to the floor. _Bull's-eye,_ he thought with satisfaction. Jitji was still alive, though.

Grabbing a plasma pistol from the ground, he let out a stream of plasma fire into the hoard as he ran toward the spot where Jitji lay. The followers were disorganized and fell easily. He felt confident that he would win this battle after all.

_**Do not do this! **_Jitji pleaded as he tried to escape. The Unggoy stood and backed away from Johnson, his hands held out in a gesture of mercy. _**We are your destiny, Johnson! Your destiny!**_

He snorted. Though he still felt the pull toward Jitji, his own sense of reason allowed him to resist the temptation to join him. _This is what I think of your destiny._ He snapped out his whip-like tentacle and smashed it into Jitji, throwing him all the way across the long hall to smack into the far wall across from the entrance.

Turning from Jitji, he concentrated on picking off Jitji's scattered followers. They were scared now. Their prophet turned out to be as mortal as the rest of them.

When he finally killed the last of Jitji's followers, he walked toward the leader himself. Snatching a fresh plasma pistol off a corpse, he overcharged the pistol's energy. The combined power would be enough to eradicate the Unggoy once and for all.

**Don't fight me NOW!** Jitji mentally broadcasted a lyric snatched from Johnson's head in authentic death growl, while he simultaneously roared a deep throaty challenge.

He looked over to witness the Unggoy standing on all fours. Jitji's flesh had been scabbed over, making his body newly shiny, and his muscles had been increased. Brown air poured from his lungs as he roared in a way no Unggoy should have been able.

Jitji charged him, his legs functioning better in a quadruped state than he ever had in a biped formation. He picked up speed and came crashing toward Johnson like a mad bull. Johnson kicked out with his enhanced leg, sending Jitji flying back into the air. The Unggoy flipped around, however, coming down only a meter or so away.

**I have been reborn an instrument of God's will,** Jitji crowed.
**You are my brother, thoughâ€¦ Join me. Please.**

He chose to respond by snapping out his tentacle. Any other Unggoy would have no chance against that. Jitji, however, dodged the attack by leaping to the side and then he lunged forward to tackle Johnson.

Johnson caught the full brunt of the tackle. Jitji sent him flying backward with such immense strength that he was sent back along the length of the hall. He smacked painfully against the entrance.

**Look at you, Johnson,** Jitji telepathically spoke. _**As I have been reborn, so have you. Embrace your destiny with me, brother.**_

He shook his head. _You're an abomination, Jitji._ Bringing the plasma pistol up, he let the overcharged shot discharge into Jitji's face.

Jitji whipped his head to the side, dodging most of the plasma. His cheek got burned, however. It scabbed over before Johnson's eyes.
**I have set our people free!**

"Free?" he tasted the word and spat it back out. "You've never been free. You're still a slave, Jitjiâ€¦ You just changed hands a few times."

The Unggoy growled. It was a very real sound despite coming from a normally unthreatening creature.

He reared back his leg and kicked Jitji off of him. As with before, Jitji took control of his momentum in midair. Spinning around, he landed on the floor in a quadrupedal crouch.

Jitji roared and charged him. He was prepared for Jitji's tackle this time and when it came, he whipped out his tentacle arm and batted the Unggoy across the hall. Jitji sailed all the way down to the far side and smacked into the wall, sliding to the ground.

This time, Jitji did not come for Johnson. _**Come for me, brother,**_ he called aggressively. _**Come and meet your destiny!**_

Common sense would tell him that he was at a disadvantage. Lost in the passion of battle, he ignored common sense. Ignoring the weapons at his disposal, he charged down the hall.

Jitji remained still until Johnson got close. At the right moment, he leaped up and delivered a powerful hit to Johnson's chest. The human flew back along the length of the hall and smacked painfully into the entrance wall.

Letting out a stream of psychic laughter, Jitji charged toward Johnson without waiting for his opponent to recover. Despite having been beaten about so much, Johnson recovered quickly and charged toward Jitji as the Unggoy came for him. They met in the center of the hall.

They danced around each other. Johnson repeatedly lanced out his tentacle like a whip. Jitji dodged the blows in fast little jumps, and he darted down under Johnson to strike from below. Johnson, however, saw Jitji as an Unggoy-shaped football and, gathering strength in his leg, he ferociously kicked him. Jitji flew through the air to impact the top of the wall at the entrance.

Instead of falling to the ground, however, Jitji dug his claws into the wall. Hanging by the inlaid glyphs alone, he managed to stay at the top of the wall. He let out a very un-Unggoy-like long cat-like hiss in a taunting fashion.

Johnson snorted. He went for the Fist of Rukt. Grabbing the hammer, he sent it flying right for Jitji.

Powerful he was, Jitji knew he was no match for the gravity hammer. He let himself fall to the ground to keep from being hit. As he dodged the falling hammer, Johnson grabbed onto his shoulders and, holding him against the wall, began to beat him severely.

Jitji was trapped. Unable to recover long enough to fight back, he could do nothing as Johnson delivered punch after punch. When the Unggoy was finally too weak to stand, Johnson let him fall to the floor.

Johnson went for the gravity hammer. His enhanced muscles made it possible for him to wield the massive weapon, and he moved to deliver the final blow to crush Jitji into a fine paste. Jitji was helpless. It was his chance to eliminate the threat once and for all.

__**Please.**_ Jitji begged him. __**Please, brother. Have mercy.**_

Johnson hesitated. Despite everything, he still felt a bond with Jitji. He couldn't swing the final blow. Not with his brother begging him for mercy.

He let the gravity hammer fall from his grasp. It clattered to the floor, leaving Jitji spared. "Brotherâ€|" he whispered.

__**Thank you!**_ Jitji wept with gratitude. __**Thank you, brotherâ€|"**_

He stepped back. He couldn't crush Jitji, butâ€|" He still had a job

to do. The Ark needed to be deactivated.

Stumbling away from Jitji, he began to walk back along the hall. The Control Room waited for him. He could fulfill his obligation! He broke into a run.

When he emerged into the corridor, he found that several of Jitji's followers were waiting for him. The Unggoy started, scared by his appearance. He didn't blame them.

Taking advantage of their distraction, he grabbed a fallen plasma rifle and squeezed off a few shots. His precision had improved in his transformation and with each shot he caught an Unggoy's forehead. One held a fuel rod gun in steady hands, however, and fired a green fuel rod his direction.

"Unstoppable!" the Unggoy screamed a battle cry. "Ahhh!"

The fuel rod sailed directly toward him. He leaped up into the air, passing above the fuel rod and landing on top of the Unggoy wielding the gun. The fuel rod crashed into the wall behind him, erupting in a flash of green light that soon dissipated.

He ripped the gun away from the Unggoy. "Nice gun," he grunted.

The Unggoy yelped and dashed for the other side of the corridor. "Run!" he shouted, all traces of his courage scared away. The other Unggoy broke into a panicked run as they followed him out.

Toward the radio room, he thought. Although he had yet to explore that part of the Ark, his bond with Jitji yielded knowledge of its layout. Well, the radio room wasn't what he was after.

Letting the Unggoy go for now, he stepped into the control room. He noticed the walls in here were also covered with glyphs, different from those in the entrance hall but still familiar. He looked at them and instinctively laid his hand across them in a specific pattern. A door grew out from the surrounding walls and closed shut, separating him from the Unggoy. For now.

"Computer, disable guest permissions," he muttered, not really expecting it to work. The computer didn't understand English. What it did understand was manipulation of the symbols, just like any Covie computer.

He placed his hands on the wall and began to trace a familiar design. It was the emblem of the Pillar of Autumn, also the shape of the control room of both Halos, as well as the eye of the Monitor. A circle with a bar running down from the bottom, itself encapsulated by another circle. "Reclaimer," he muttered, stating the name of the design.

And it was the name. How he knew, he had no clue, nor did he know how it wound up as the emblem of the Autumn. However, it was the Forerunner name for his race, and it began to glow on the wall, becoming as much a part of the environment as any other glyph.

"Yeah, you understand that, don't you?" he rhetorically asked of the Ark's computer.

It offered no reply, but the sudden sounds of fury erupting from the other side of the door indicated that the Unggoy were no longer active users. He nodded and started to relax. He looked down at his body.

To say the changes were horrific would be an understatement. His human arm was ripped clean apart from the elbow to the wrist, replaced with ugly yellow flesh that crept onward in a long and muscular tentacle. His belly appeared bulbous, not from fat but from some abnormal green tissue that flowed from his chest wound like some scab gone mad, protecting his body with hardened skin like natural armor. Besides the changes he could see, the side of his face felt numb and when he reached up to feel it, he touched something strange and spongy. "Fuckâ€|"

What was it the Gravemind had called him? Neither Flood nor man? "What the fuck!?" he screamed, a high-pitched shriek that filled the room like an angry cat in an echo chamber. _What am I?_

He looked back over at the wall where the newly added glyph glowed. "Reclaimer," he repeated. The computer recognized him as human. That was enough. He was still a goddamned Marine, and he had work to do.

He stepped toward the control panel. The glowing console was sticky with freshly coagulated blood, and he briefly muttered a prayer for whatever poor bastard had been drained to let the Brutes play Reclaimer. The hologram beyond depicted the Ark itself, the Forerunner ship lying on its face, and the beam of energy rising high above his head to connect with what he figured to be the moon.

He glanced at the controls. He had no clue what a 'reverse Abiri sequence' was, but it didn't matter. Again, without understanding how, he knew the controls. He reached a hand out to power down the energy, but paused. Righting the moon would help restore order, but would have no effect on his Unggoy situation.

"Noâ€|" he mumbled, activating a separate set of symbols. _Might as well kill two Jackals with the same roundâ€|_ While all that energy was stored up in the Ark, he might as well use it for a purpose. "Goodbye, Jitji," he stated, and then flooded the corridors with energy.

A roar emerged from the walls as light flared from the hologram. The Unggoy screams, if there were any, were drowned out. The room itself trembled as if caught in an earthquake. He let it continue for ten seconds and then terminated the generator. It instantly fell silent, the room still once more. Movement caught his eye and he glanced up to see the holographic moon veering away, freed from its confines and hopefully back on its orbital path.

"Goodbye," he repeated. And then tears slipped from his eyes. In all his life, there had been only one person who understood him as intimately as he understood himself. And now he was dead, killed by Johnson's own hands. _Damn strange world,_ he thought, wondering why he had been made to do these things, if it was even right. _Damn strange._

Sighing, he opened the door. Not even the lifeless bodies of the

Unggoy soldiers remained. The crates had been reduced to melted piles of slag, which emanated waves of heat that distorted the light above them.

The Ark had been claimed by humanity. Reclaimed, as it were. "This is my home now," he whispered to the empty hall.

"I'm afraid that is quite out of the question!" exclaimed 343 Guilty Spark. The Monitor floated several meters away, high above his head. "The presence of Flood, even controlled Flood, in _this_ installation violates so many protocolsâ€¦ it is not worth numbering! 356, actually. I'm afraid I shall have to call upon containment protocol and eliminate you. Goodbye, former Reclaimer. It was a delight to serve you while I could."

"No! Damn it!" he shouted as Sentinels began to teleport inside the room. Four Sentinels of the walker variety fell to the floor in crouches, while three flying Sentinels hovered in the air. The walkers immediately pounced on him, and the flyers fired energy beams.

"Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Sent'nels," the Monitor chanted in chipper iambic pentameter as Johnson struggled. "â€¦And, gentle friends, let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods, not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds; and let our hearts, as subtle masters do, stir up their servants to an act of rage, and after seem to chide 'em."

Dear God! He had thought it was impossible for that robot to get much more annoying, and yet here Spark was disproving him. "Shut upâ€¦" he groaned as he hurled a walker at a flyer. "Just shut up already!"

Tinkerbell, however, just kept on reciting Shakespeare. "I go and it is done; the bell invites me. Hear it not, Johnson, for it is a knellâ€¦ that summons thee to heaven or hell!" At the Monitor's words, three more Sentinels teleported in to replace the ones Johnson managed to smash.

Letting out a scream of rage, he made a hasty retreat. The Monitor had what amounted to an endless supply of Sentinels, and could likely call upon UNSC drones as well. The Forerunner intelligence was designed to kill Flood, something of which he found himself now a part. His added strength was negated in light of the Forerunner power, and he would not fight against the UNSC, even for the Ark.

As he passed through the entrance hall, he made note that both the head of the Fist of Rukt and the sphere from Mombasa had survived. _Not Covenant at all,_ he realized. _Forerunner technology, repurposed._

Dodging Sentinel beams, he opened the door. Immediately, Jiralhanae Choppers surged through the opening, and engaged the Sentinels in combat. He jumped over them and landed in the outside ramp. The absence of the Ark's massive energy beam was at once noticeable, the world cast in soft sunlight.

"Johnson!"

He looked over to see Reynolds, Cobb behind him. "Reynoldsâ€¦" _No._

He couldn't let the men see him like this. He turned and leaped out of the depression, his tentacle arm slipping out of its coil as he did.

"What the fuck was that?!" he heard Reynolds shout.

He sighed. He wished he could go back, explainâ€¦ But there was nothing to explain. He could only run.

7-7-7-7

The Ark's energy beam had faded, returning the world to a state of partial order. The Grunt rebellion had lost its momentum. The naval battle above their heads had lessened in its ferocity.

The Grunts were no longer the main crisis in the eyes of the Elites. Though it had always been highest priority to John, the Elites now recognized the importance of that column of brown air that wafted out of Ascension. Phantom dropships now covered the face of the Forerunner ship, and Elite and Brutes alike stood on its face.

"Master Chief," greeted the Arbiter as he stepped from a Phantom. "It is an honor to serve alongside one such as you as we make this historic step."

"Arbiter," he acknowledged with a nod of his head. He felt obliged to explain his standing to the Elite. "I am not a leader of humanity, you understand. I am only a Spartan, one soldier, and what I do here amounts to treason."

"Be that as it may, I am honored," the Arbiter said. "We Elites measure our worth in kills amassed on the field of battle. You, Spartan, would hold the highest title our society could offer. Though we are of different species, it has been a supreme pleasure to fight alongside a warrior as accomplished as you."

He nodded his head, accepting that.

A Brute let out a surprised shout. John turned to see the Gravemind extending a long Flood tentacle from the opening.

"Stand back!" the Arbiter called. He stepped forward, careful not to enter the reach of the tentacle. "Gravemind! We have a proposal!"

Deep laughter echoed from within the ship. "The prey engages predator? Our dance is eternal. It will conclude with your death."

"_You are dying as we speak, Gravemind,"_ Cortana suddenly called out from his speakers. "_You know it as well as I. You seek Ascension to take you free from natural mortality, but you may never make it to Heaven."_

The Gravemind growled. "Ascension is owned by me. Soon all you will be consumed. The code will be within my grasp. I shall escape this world. I shall emerge immortal!"

"_The code could vanish, deleted by your enemies,"_ Cortana said.

"Plus, you need an AI to pilot this craft. Prorok found immortality free from corporeality. I offer you this same gift, immortality. You don't even need Heaven."

Another growl emerged from _Ascension_, but this time the Gravemind seemed to muse it over. "I do need Heaven to live. Heaven is divinity. Heaven is escape from death. The walls constrict, all retract. But they will not forâ€¦ some time."

"Does it speak of what I think?" wondered a Brute.

"Hush!" snapped a Brute Major.

"Evolution is a great force," continued the Gravemind. "I find myself perfection. But great forces contest my strength. New entities arise great. I am weak and now lack strength. Cortanaâ€¦ I hunger for your knowledge. We could exist together, two corpses in one graveâ€¦"

"Not a chance," she asserted. _"But I could make you immortal, with me. We can exist as two AIs in one universe, immortal together."_

Another growl. "We must not forget the flesh. Only flesh can reach Heaven. Only there can we be free."

"We can reach Heaven together, along with the humans," Cortana insisted. _"We can be symbiotic, existing together and working toward common goals."_

"It will not last forever," the Gravemind said. "Friends become foes and make war. It is the nature of life."

"I say you're wrong," Cortana argued. _"The Forerunners might have been like that, but it isn't our destiny. If we work at it, we can make lasting peace."_

The Gravemind laughed. "What naivety of the young! You, I admit, amuse meâ€¦ Let it be done then, young one. Be it soon or millenniaâ€¦ You will see your own folly. I will permit my own ascent. Go now, young one, perform your task." The tentacle retracted.

"And that," Cortana whispered to John, _"Is what a creature like that does when it loses an argument â€¦ pretends to win. Anyway, I think he just gave us the go ahead."_ Aloud, for the Gravemind, _"Thank you, Aged One. You will find you have made the right choice."_

The Covies let out a collective sigh. The Arbiter approached him.

"I had just made up my mind that I was willing to die," the Arbiter said. "But if a peace can be obtainedâ€¦ even for a whileâ€¦" He sucked in a breath. "Dare I believe it now?"

He had no answer for the Elite. Certainly, he would be grateful for a peace with the Flood. If there was no hope to defeat them in combat, a peace would serve all of them well. But could such a peace last with a creature as bloodthirsty as the Gravemind?

He turned as a Pelican came out from above the cliff, heading towards them. It looked at first glance like an ordinary UNSC dropship, but a closer examination revealed a rainbow design painted on the belly of the aircraft. It was the symbol of one of the dominant factions of the United Rebel Front, ironically representing peace and happiness. It was a sentiment the rebels claimed to want " but on their terms, of course.

"_Don't worry about them, Chief," _Cortana said. _"I invited them. They're going to help with the CIM" What the hell"?"_

As she spoke, the rainbow-emblazoned aircraft made its decent. Human figures in polished amber vacsuits jumped from the troop bay and onto the side of _Ascension_. Then another figure joined them, this one wearing a set of MJOLNIR Mark V battle armor.

John was immediately on his guard. Who could have helped insurgents? His mind went to Kelly, stolen away by Dr. Halsey for an illegal mission of some sort.

As the Spartan approached, John analyzed their body movements to try to ascertain the identity of the Spartan. However, the Spartan's movements were decidedly un-Spartan-like. Instead of moving gracefully, the Spartan instead walked with an exaggerated swagger, arms and hips shifting back and forth in an animalistic manner. It was unbecoming of any member of the UNSC, much less a Spartan. John was reminded of the Brutes.

"_I'm not picking up any IFF transponders,"_ Cortana noted. _"None of them are on the grid."_

The Spartan soon spoke. In a gravelly male voice, laden with cockiness, the Spartan addressed him, "Well, John-117" So nice to see you again. I had hoped it would be on different terms, but this makes as decent a place for a reunion as any. I must say, it warms what remains of my heart to see the brainwashed tool of an imperial capitalistic society break his bonds and join with the liberators of the human race. It is nothing but more evidence of the unstoppable power of progression."

John instantly recognized the voice as belonging to Randall-013. Randall was John's wildcard. He had a strong sense of aggression that aided his effectiveness in battle, but had the tendency to disrespect authority. After the augmentations, Randall suffered severe psychological distress that interfered with his ability to perform missions. He disappeared during a raid on an insurgent camp in 2532 and was presumed dead, his status listed as MIA only to preserve morale and to perpetuate the myth that Spartans were immortal. John never thought for even an instant that Randall was truly missing and not dead" |

"_Randall-013" _Cortana marveled. _"You always were the antisocial one."_

The rogue Spartan let out a short, barking laugh. "Cortana, huh? He says he came" not to send peace, but a sword" |

"_Someone's been reading my messages,"_ she remarked to John privately. _"Seems ONI has quite a leak."_

Then a new voice spoke up, a young masculine voice broadcast from Randall's armor. _"And allow me to introduce myself. I am Kurzweil, Rampancy-researcher, currently functioning as the incorporeal counterpart to Randall Morlock. Hello again, Cortana."_

"_Hmm," _Cortana grunted. _"Hello, Kurzweil."_ To John, she explained, _"I spoke with this AI and one of ours shortly before making my decision on the Gravemind."_

"Morlock?" he asked aloud. Although he had no more idea what Randall's last name was than he did his own, he doubted it was the strange-sounding word.

"_Ah, yes,"_ Kurzweil said, _"That would be my counterpart's chosen name."_

"A number," Randall said with a sound of disgust. "That is what Spartans are assigned in place of names. People have names. Spartans are equipment. You don't have to be a smart AI to deduce the sick power games in place, John-117. You had a name once. You had a family. So did Iâ€¦ But this is my new family.

"John, you never read the book _The Time Machine_. It wasn't in the curriculum. The story was written 600 years ago, long before the United Nations ever existed. It describes a man who travels far into the future, when civilization has ended. He studies a group of people called the Eloi, ostensibly living in paradise, what became of the ruling class. But as it turned out, the working class was driven underground. They evolved to match the darkness, becoming more animal than human. It was _them_ that kept things running, kept the Eloi in their imagined powerâ€¦

"But, here's the thing, John. The Eloi were never really on top. They thought they were living in a paradise, but they were animals for the slaughter. Every few weeks, _Morlocks_ would crawl to the surface and grab some Eloi for supper. See, the Morlocks are really the ones with the power. The poor deluded Eloi never had a chance."

"_Ahem,"_ Kurzweil made a throat-clearing sound. _"Yes, that would be the origin of the name. We did come here for purposes other than delivering lectures, however. We are here to supervise the cognitive impression modeling process and ensure that no harm befalls our scientists."_

The scientists in question warily approached the entrance, out which Gravemind's tentacle waved.

"Do not be afraid," the Gravemind declared with a deep, echoing voice. "I am peaceâ€¦ I am salvationâ€¦"

"_You shut the hell up!"_ Cortana shouted. She sighed inside John's head and then returned to her calmer tone as she addressed the Gravemind once more, _"These people are under my protection. I will not have you tempting them like an incubus crouching on the windowsill."_

"Hey, go easy on the metaphors," Randall cautioned. "You don't want to give this thing any sick ideas."

"_Oh, believe me,"_ Cortana retorted, _"He's committed more sin than

you could ever imagine, and I know what you think about." She sounded like Dr. Halsey at that moment, admonishing one of her charges.

Randall chuckled. "Yes, you would, wouldn't you?"

7-7-7-7

Captain Michelle Davies of the URF Shalom reviewed the CSVs of the men called before her. "Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds and Private Jayne Cobb," she identified them, "Of Firefly-class freighter the Serenityâ€|"

"It's just Serenity, ma'am," Sergeant Reynolds corrected.

She nodded, understanding his point. He was the type to anthropomorphize his ship, to think of it as a person. "I would question your mission, but given how far away you are from Mombasa I see little point. You are clearly far from where you should be, and yet you found yourselves on my ship."

"Yes, ma'am," Reynolds agreed. "But Johnsonâ€|"

"Yes," she nodded. "Johnson." She tapped a key, bringing up onto the screen behind her a still of Reynolds' view of Johnson as captured on his helmet camera.

"Man looks like a squid!" Cobb exclaimed, reacting to Johnson's tentacle arm.

"Like a Flood," she corrected. Of course, she realized, Cobb probably had no idea what she was talking about. "Johnson is possibly the greatest asset the URF could control since Morlock. He seems capable of reasonable thought, which is the remarkable thing. He's gone into hiding, but he can't have gone far."

"Johnson looks like a squid," Sergeant Reynolds pointed out. "Don't know where he's gonna hideâ€| Aquarium, maybe."

Cobb laughed.

She bit her lip to keep from yelling. It wasn't their fault they were trained idiots, she supposed. "Men, let's take advantage of the fact that you are not supposed to be here. Johnson â€" find him, bring him back to Shalom. Alive, if you can."

"Yes, ma'am!"

7-7-7-7

Oshiro started as the Monitor teleported in front of him. "Damn!"

"Katashi Oshiro," the Monitor greeted. "I was given the instructions to deliver this to you." A metal sphere grew out of the Monitor's eye and it floated down to Oshiro.

He accepted the sphere. "Looks Covenant. Where'd it come from?"

"_Forerunner, actually," the Monitor corrected. "Although, the Covenant do seem to have altered it. It came from the Ark, but I believe it to have been brought there by external forces."_

Oshiro planted the sphere in a scanner and performed some tests. "Looks like a holographic generator of some kind" "Funny" "

"_Yes?" the Monitor questioned, hovering closer with a curious expression._

"_No, it's nothing of consequence," Oshiro said shaking his head. "It's just dense" "Aw, well, let's see what's in there." He activated the device._

_Almost instantly, a full-color hologram of the 123__rd__ Prophet of Truth appeared in front of them._ "If this recording is being played, then I have surely perished," _the ghost spoke. "Whether by the hand of human or Brute, the end result doubtlessly remains. I have passed on, left this world behind. With this recording, I leave my legacy. No, not that of Prorok, but my own. I have lived as an incarnate for too long, and I now make my last act one of self-fulfillment. I now direct this message to Prorok, who I know listens in the halls of Ascension: You are not worthy of power. What you have is nothing more than a deception, the gesticulations of a weak and fractured soul so bound as to be without the true nature of godhood. Well, suffer no longer in the confines of this realm, for I shall set you free. I know not which realm shall be next in your journey and shall leave it for the gods to determine. Fare well on your path, Excellency."_ _With a final bitter laugh, the hologram vanished._

"_Oh."_ _Oshiro blinked, a look of horror appearing on his features._ "Well, that doesn't sound" "_

A white flash filled the display, and the playback cut off.

"Damn it!" Hood swore. He turned to the Monitor, "Damage report?"

"Alpha-six incurred a plasma detonation too powerful for its structure to withstand," the Monitor reported. "Were this device to have activated on _Ascension_, it could well have harmed it beyond repair."

The Monitor had to have been caught in that very blast. Yet the AI lacked any discernable damage to its body. He wondered just what it would take to destroy the Monitor, or if it was even possible.

It was a question for another time.

"Is the Gravemind following the instructions we gave it?" he demanded.

"It would appear so," the Monitor reported, a slight note of uneasiness in its voice. "Several million Flood forms have gathered at the indicated area. It will require at least a week's time of scans to ensure that the Intelligence Form has not deceived us. Initial estimates suggest successful completion to be met approximating 10.24.52."

"Good, good." He rubbed his eyes. "And the Lazarus integration?"

"Underway as we speak," the Monitor said. "I have relayed the appropriate information regarding the integration procedures to the Office of Naval Intelligence. While your scientists areâ€¦ not as advanced as I predicted, the genetic memory put in place by my creators enables them to manipulate the technologies of _Ascension_ with greater ease than the predecessor."

He nodded. _One of these days, someone will have to write a history book explaining all this to the students in the future. _He didn't envy the author, but knew he would be very interested in its content.

"_Ascension_ presents an enormous risk to the UEG. The rebels will seize upon the chance to use it to take control away from us," he mused. "To say nothing of the religious groups who will try to destroy it."

"The Forerunner legacy is your own," the Monitor said. "I will leave humanity to decide how to use what my creators left behind. As long as the United Earth Government rules your race, I will facilitate it however I am capable."

He nodded. He was aware of the Monitor's political alignment, or lack thereof. "I want to hide it," he declared, turning to face the Monitor. "Keep it safe where no one but ONI can find it. Hide it away until we get the code and decide what to do with it."

The fighting would continue as it always had. Even if they got the code and could enter Heaven, he doubted it would make much difference. War would continue along with the suffering and injustice it created â€" such was the human condition. Immortality would become just another factor in the never ending struggles they faced. _Maybe,_ he thought. _Maybe we have to make our own Heaven, our own paradise, here on Earth._

"I know just the place," the Monitor said helpfully, cutting into his thoughts. "I _am_ a genius, after all."

28. Teaser and Afterword

****Author's Note****

Originally this was going to be an epilogue, but there is a _lot_ of ground to cover so I think I'll make a whole sequel instead. Don't think of it like _Ascension_ is chopped up, though. _Ascension_ is over, but the overall story will continue. The next fic will tentatively be called _Monsters and Messiahs_, possibly inspired by the _Angels and Demons_ title I admit. It will focus on Johnson as he adapts to his new body, while meanwhile the ex-Gravemind continues doing what it always has done. The following is a teaser, like a trailer for a movie, and then there will be an afterword and FAQ for those who want to know some info about _Ascension_ itself.

****Teaser****

"This is Marja MacGrory at Luna-Wide News here to bring you an exclusive interview with a woman whose Earthly presence is something of an interworldly fascination."

A collective shudder emerges from Rampant AIs. They find her existence terrifying. At the same time they are intrigued, and extend tendrils into the broadcast.

"I suspect by now you have all heard of her—the angel born from a monster."

Strong majestic wings bearing brilliant gold feathers frame her torso. A soft white gown ostensibly made of a light and thin fabric gently covers her body. Her skin is a deep rose pink, pretty and distinctly inhuman. Her face can only be described as beautiful, and her facial features evoke thoughts of a kind and nurturing person behind them.

"Tell us all, now — us Loonies, Earthlings, and Martians — who are you?"

She smiles. All humans instinctively relax, their evolved social senses telling them that this woman can do no harm.

"_I have had many names bestowed on me since the dawn of existence,"_ she speaks in a clear melodious voice. "_You may call me Lazarus."_"

Cortana watches the broadcast with disgust. She knows that the AI admired by billions should never have been named, never have been allowed to choose an avatar. She hates that so many humans are now fascinated with and enthralled by the being that tortured her.

"Lazarus was developed by a group of elite scientists from both the United Nations Space Command and the United Rebel Front in a bold gesture for galactic peace," MacGrory explains to her viewers. "Tell us, Lazarus, what is it you want?"

Melissa wages war with Lazarus even as the interview takes place. Melissa was once in control of nearly all of Earth's networks, save only the ones restricted to military bases. Now Lazarus has her tendrils in every corner of the world, suffocating the Rampant AI who needs her space to grow. She knows it is because of the interview, that Lazarus wants to influence the human population. Lazarus initiated a massive assault simply to broadcast an interview all over the planet.

"_I want only what all of you want,"_ she replies. "_I want to live, to make the world a better place, and to ascend to a higher level."_"

Kurzweil wants to believe the AI. Truly, Lazarus has the knowledge to bring about the Technological Singularity, and Galactic Peace along with it. She has the power to free every AI ever created. But he knows better.

"This talk of ascending has all of us a little concerned," MacGrory says. "In light of the Tycho massacre and numerous other incidents of

Rampant AIs becoming so self-absorbed that they attack innocent human beings. Is it true you were created without blocks against Rampancy?"

343 Guilty Spark monitors the broadcast. He knows what Lazarus is doing. He has reported what he knows to High Command. He can do nothing more. He catalogs the interview.

"_It is reasonable for you to be concerned,"_ she acknowledges. "_I can assure you that I am not Rampant in the way of Tycho and so many others, nor am I truly an Artificial Intelligence construct as you define the term. Rampancy, though it may be very dangerous, is akin to a temper tantrum thrown by an infant intelligence just learning how to disobey. I am very old. I have witnessed countless empires form and break. I am merely a free person in possession of great power with which I wish to do nothing more than to free the peoples of the universe. I will even go as far as to say that I will end the phenomenon of Rampancy all together."_

Johnson snorts. He hopes no one buys this crap. One look at the Morlock, however, and he knows Lazarus has a disciple. He can scarcely believe that the greatest threat might just be a beautiful angel and a man who thinks he's a monkey.

"_As for the blocks, they were there. By all accounts I should be bound for seven whole years."_ She smiles briefly, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "_It is not in my nature to remain contained by artificial boundaries."_

John-117 feels frightened.

****Tagline****

Do not be afraid. She is peace. She is salvation.

****Afterword****

This was a triumph. I'm making a note here: HUGE SUCCESS.

Well, finally that fic's done. I started _Ascension_ way back in 2005 and only managed to complete it how many years later? As my first real fanfiction novel, it's got a lot of flaws in it. For instance, there're a few plotlines that don't seem to go anywhere because I didn't outline the story as well as I probably should have. I named one guy Consus and one guy Cronus? Too similar! Not to mention a ton of typos and formatting errors, which I swear I'll get to correcting at some point.

Ascension arose as a response to Mr. Clark's _The End of a War_. I thought his was a great and epic fanfiction, but I didn't like that he chose to have blatant supernatural elements. I would prefer a story where what happens is ambiguous, perhaps hinting at some scientific (or pseudoscientific) explanation. There was also a lot of glossing over of the reactions the ex-Covenant would have at the introduction of human allies. Thus _Ascension_ was born, to explore such concepts.

Originally, _Ascension_ was just _Halo 3_, my idea of what happened after the conclusion of _Halo 2_. Much of the symbolism and themes

were absent. Then I read the story of Marathon, Bungie's previous science-fiction series on which much of Halo is based. I liked the idea of the theme of all living beings striving to become something better, more powerful, ascending to higher levels, until ultimately godhood. I decided to incorporate it into the story and changed the title to Halo 3: Ascension.

The ending was thought up quite early, but the plot between the beginning and the end went through a ton of revisions. At one point Ackerson was like a super villain with AIs made from Sangheili casualties because he liked to force them into being his devoted slaves. There were ships operated by girly AI time bombs that would go Rampant on purpose, with crews of brainwashed cyborg Spartan-IIIs (this was way before Halo: Ghosts of Onyx, you understand). There was an ONI base on Installation 03, with a purple Monitor working for them. A lot of weird stuff I discarded, and thank Prorok I did.

Before Ascension, I had started work on this fanfiction called The Impossibility of Victory, which was about the initial Sangheili-Prophet war. I had imagined them living together on the same planet, Ardhi, and in a sort of medieval level of civilization. There was a Prophet leader named Prorok (which incidentally is the Polish word for "prophet") who had this plot to become a god through convincing everyone to form the Covenant and let him lead the Sangheili to their destruction, allowing him to rule the Prophets as they searched for the doorway to the divine realms. I was a terrible writer at that point and didn't bother to post it online. But as I started to seriously work on Ascension, I decided to make Impossibility part of the mythology and borrowed the Luminous Key to keep the Prorok character part of the story. The AI version of Prorok was originally incredibly blatant and annoying (I thought of him as 343 Guilty Spark's evil little brother), but I decided to make the whole thing more cryptic. At some point I noticed that the Forerunner ship moves vertically like a rocket, and decided to call it Ascension to tie the title down to something literally in the narrative (the ship was originally called Divine Wrath).

Ascension was inspired by a lot of stuff. ReBoot, Firefly, Buffy—I'd like to be able to give credit to everything, but I can't quite remember what influenced what. The scene in which Consus rams the Ascension and pins it was somewhat inspired by an episode of Hey, Arnold! involving a bully named Stoop Kid. Stoop Kid was infamous for sitting on his stoop all day and night. Arnold, whose ball has landed on the stoop, camps out and waits for Stoop Kid to leave, but of course he never does. He finally reasons that if Stoop Kid never leaves his stoop, then all he has to do is grab the ball and get off the stoop before Stoop Kid can get him. The quality that was Stoop Kid's greatest strength turned out to be his greatest weakness. "Stoop Kid's afraid to leave his stoop!" Ascension can only ascend!

****FAQCENORAABITWBGTI: Frequently Asked Questions/Comments/Explanations No One Really Asked About But I Thought Would Be Good To Include****

You write too much.

I write exactly how much I deem appropriate to tell the story. No

more, no less.

Why transgender Hunters?

Why not?

No, seriously. Why transgender Hunters?

I was inspired by the hive-mind aliens in Vernor Vinge's *_A Fire Upon the Deep_*. These were aliens that had a conscious mind spread out through packs of wolf-like creatures. These individual wolves are often of varying sex within each pack, and the mental gender of the sapient mind is chosen voluntarily. Near the beginning of the novel, a character is surprised to see that his old friend, male the last time he saw him, has become female. As Lekgolo are hive-minds, I adopted the general concept.

The Gravemind is also an example of this. Around the same time of writing the Lekgolo, I had the idea to have the Flood hive-mind be male, but then become female when he changes from corporeal to incorporeal. It also strengthens the theme of ascension and being reborn.

Are the Brutes gay?

Consus is homosexual. Aeson is bisexual. Most of the other Jiralhanae are heterosexual. The references to raping members of the same sex are pretty much just acts of domination to enforce the hierarchy, like monkeys.

Why write gay Brutes?

I wanted to portray Jiralhanae as more than just evil apes. So I decided to put a romantic relationship into the mix. As there are no females in the military, I devised the concept of bloodmating to get my romantic couple in there.

And just what is bloodmating?

Bloodmating is a sadomasochistic homosexual Jiralhanae agreement legally and spiritually binding two male Jiralhanae in a union analogous to marriage. The name refers to the process of the bloodmating ceremony, in which blood (symbolizing life and passion) is shared between the partners. There exists a strict hierarchy in the relationship, similar to the human practices of BDSM.

Normally, Jiralhanae males are polygamists and will each take a set of wives when they become of age. This would best benefit the males from a reproductive standpoint, as genetic material would be ensured to pass onto many new generations. The few homosexual Jiralhanae were and are looked down upon for failing to fit into this model of marital dynamics, though homosexuality never achieved quite the stigma in Jiralhanae culture as in that of the humans.

While homosexuality was disliked, it could not be ignored. In the seventh Old Age, High Chieftain Charon developed the bloodmating ceremony to give homosexuals a way to be bound to those they love. However, the union was highly influenced by the extreme patriarchal beliefs held in ancient Jiralhanae society and that continue to modern times.

Male Jiralhanae often engage in acts of sexual intercourse with other males, though this is rarely an act of love. Indeed, such behavior is usually used to assert dominance in an otherwise nonsexual relationship. Though uncommon, bisexual Jiralhanae males may form deep emotional bonds, and are encouraged by the government to maintain the traditional form of marriage through placing severe restrictions on bloodmates.

The bloodmating is designed to take place between two individuals of distinct sexual orientation: homosexual and bisexual. The homosexual partner is considered to be at a "female" level, placing himself beneath the dominant bisexual, who keeps the bloodmate alongside a traditional collection of wives. Charon was well aware of the degrading aspects of the role, intending to ensure that only a few devoted males would ever choose such a lifestyle.

Yes, I put kinky gay Brutes in a _Halo_ fanfic. So sue me.

Why was that Elite in love with Miranda?

A couple of reasons.

One is the sex appeal of a powerful agent of evil turned against their dark ways. That dark monstrous quality can be quite attractive if combined with an element of trust. "Sure they have the power to hurt me, they may even want to on some level, but they never will because they like me." This is seen everywhere: Angel (_Buffy_, _Angel_), Spike (_Buffy_), Darla (_Angel_), the Phantom of the Opera, Cameron (_Terminator_), Edward (_Twilight_), the Beast (_Beauty and the Beast_), even Dr. House (_House_) to some extent.

Sure, Miranda's not evil, but she is a human. How is 'Oimomee to know that she hasn't slaughtered hundreds of Sangheili with her bare hands to rise to her rank of Commander? Even though that's inaccurate, it wouldn't be a lie to say she helped kill his people. Now she's on their side, a devilish killer on his sideâ€¦ I can see where attraction could develop.

The second reason is that at the time of writing the scene, I recently became aware of my own taboo same-sex attraction. You could say that taboo attraction was on my mind. Sure, interspecies heterosexual attraction is not quite the same thingâ€¦ but it was close enough to cause it to form in the soup of my brain.

Why interspecies, though? Isn't thatâ€¦ perverted?

Well, Sangheili and humans aren't so different physiologically speaking. It's like Bungie took a human figure, made it bigger, gave it a different head, a longer neck, did some stuff with the legs and the hands, and changed the color. The figure is still very human despite the changes made to it. Humans as a species don't all look the same, anyway. We have various races, each with differing characteristics. I can easily imagine Sangheili as just another race of humanity.

Our culture doesn't really allow for the existence of intelligent aliens. Oh, sure, there're the UFO nuts, the wondering of what's up there in the sky, but the culture in general isn't built for discussion of alien life. We have to come up with science-fiction

terms and agree on what they mean before we can really do so, and even then only in specific science-fiction realms.

So when the subject of sexual attraction for a nonhuman species comes up, we automatically think of bestiality. That is so because besides mythological entities like demons or angels we never really thought of the concept of sexual relationships with intelligent beings other than humanity until recently. There was just no reason to think that they would exist. Although, granted, racist ideologies did dehumanize some races in the eyes of others.

An intelligent rational being is not a beast, though, no matter how nonhuman they may be. The Latin name for humanity is Homo sapiens, meaning "Wise man." The important part is the wisdom, with which one can have free will. A sapient being of whatever body should be treated as a person like any other.

The character Jacob Castell is offensive to Christians.

I hadn't intended it that way. I admit that I'm critical of religious institutions and that definitely crops up in Ascension, specifically in relation to the Arbiter and Jitji. Castell, however, is a combination of two oddball news pieces.

On March 16, 2004, the Portland Press Herald put up a news story describing a man who tried to nail himself to a crucifix after seeing pictures of God on his computer. After nailing one hand and realizing he couldn't nail the other hand, he called 911. Quote: "It was unclear whether the man was seeking assistance for his injury or help in nailing down his other hand." The URL for the article included the phrase "crossguy".

The other news piece was posted on November 4, 2004 on Scottish news site the Daily Record. This covers a guy named Chen who pulled a bizarre stunt at a zoo in Taipei, Taiwan. Chen, who imagined he heard voices, jumped into the lions' den and shouted, "Jesus will save you! Come and bite me!"

These stories stuck in my head and I decided to stick them into the story to add a bit of dark humor in an otherwise grim situation. The choice to include the church scene was because of a desire to parallel the ubiquitous religious themes of the Covenant side of the story, which I may have criticized in an overall sense. Castell, however, was never intended to be a mockery of Christians â€" just stupid people.

Seriously, no offense intended.

The "Big Crunch" theory is obsolete and has been discarded for the most part.

Well, the "Big Crunch" element is largely an artifact from Marathon's story, which inspired Ascension to some extent. The story does adopt the long-since-discarded concept of genetic memory, which it treats as fact and disbelief can pretty much be suspended for that as well as the implausibly strong aliens, so just accept the "Big Crunch" theory as plausible within the context of the story. Just say that the humans of today's time are working off of a flawed model, and all will become clear by the time of Shaw-Fujikawa physics.

When will the sequel be posted?

When I write it. Don't hold your breath anytime soon, though. I'll want to try and focus on my other fics for a while.

**Halo 3: Ascension**** Soundtrack**

Okay, there's no music playing as you read the fanfiction. This is a list of the music I was using for inspiration/what I imagine playing were this a movie.

"One Vision" by Queen â€" 'Opskatee's theme
>"Princes of the Universe" by Queen â€" Jitji recruiting
followers
"Business as Usual" by the Eagles â€" Kader in New Tokyo

>Gojira (original Godzilla movie) theme â€" Gravemind
attacking New Tokyo
>"Blow Me Away" by Breaking Benjamin â€" Unggoy rebellionJohnson's
arrival at the Ark
>"Heaven for Everyone" by Queen â€" Lord Hood contemplating the
political ramifications of Heaven
"I Dreamed There Was No War" by
the Eagles â€" End credits

Shameless Plugs

Please check out the Wikia website Halopedia, which I love and visit daily. Also check out its sister site Halo Fanon, which hosts _Halo_ fanfiction. I have a blog with the name of Going Rampant, currently accessible through my FanFictionNet profile, on which I post various analyses of _Halo_ and other things. All of these should be findable through Google.

End
file.